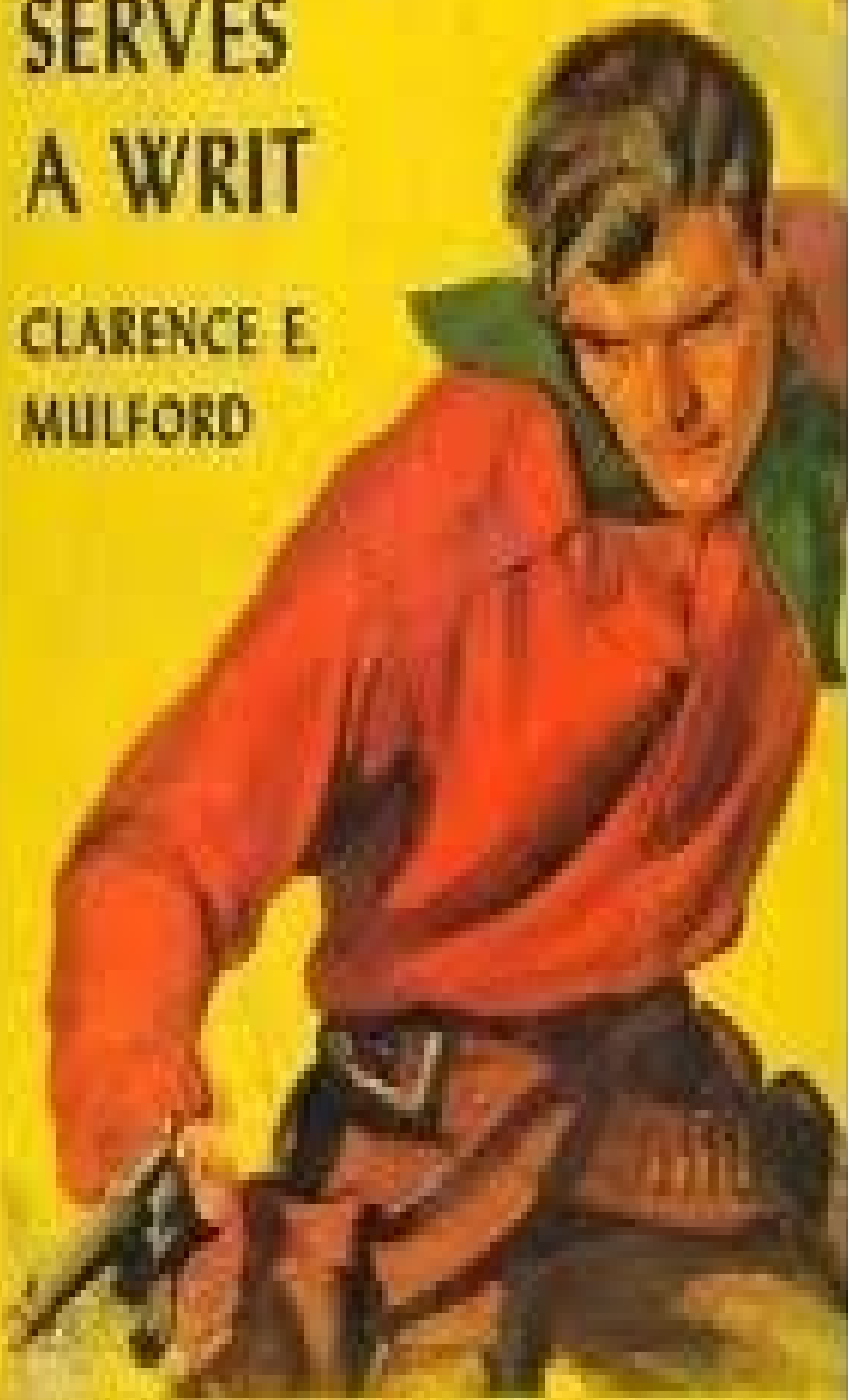


# HOPALONG CASSIDY SERVES A WRIT

CLARENCE E.  
MULFORD



*HOPALONG CASSIDY **Serves A Writ***

**CLARENCE E. MULFORD**

Hopalong Cassidy Serves a Writ



**P. F. COLLIER & SON CORPORATION**

*By Special Arrangement With*

**DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC. NEW YORK**

COPYRIGHT, 1941 BY CLARENCE E. MULFORD ALL RIGHTS  
RESERVED

CP

***Manufactured in the U. S. A,***

*HOPALONG CASSIDY **Serves A Writ***

- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [4](#)
- [5](#)
- [6](#)
- [7](#)

- [8](#)
- [9](#)
- [12](#)
- [14](#)
- [15](#)
- [16](#)
- [17](#)
- [18](#).
- [19](#)
- [21](#)
- [22](#)
- [23](#)
- [24](#)
- [25](#)
- [26](#)
- [27](#)
- [28](#)
- [29](#)
- [30](#)
- [31](#)
- [32](#)

# 1

HOPALONG CASSIDY, sheriff of Twin River County, opened the morning's mail, acquired a few more wanted posters, and hunted through a desk drawer for hammer and tacks. He moved lazily toward the board wall to add the new posters to the collection on display and, the job done, started to turn away but he chanced to let his gaze rest on an old poster concerning a train robbery, put out by Wells, Fargo and Company. He knew this handbill by heart but now idly read it again. Of the five men involved only one had been clearly seen; the others, on the ground along the right of way, had worn masks. The man who was seen had been a passenger. Had he worn a mask when boarding the train it would have been hard luck for him, and to have put on a mask when it came time for him to go to work would have been too late. If he had counted upon not being connected with the robbery he should have remained on board after pulling the signal cord and not have escaped with his confederates. When the train finally went on again, with its dynamited safe in the express car, he was missing.

One of the two deputies, carelessly watching his boss, picked the Stetson from his head and tossed it onto the table, where it slid perilously close to the edge and stopped.

"Reckon you might as well take that one down," he suggested. "Seems like it's been there long enough. Anyhow, we ain't heard nothin' more about it for a long time. That space is gettin' crowded, an' I reckon that robbery is ancient hist'ry."

The sheriff slowly reached out a hand and removed the poster and slowly looked it over.

"Yeah, I reckon so," he replied thoughtfully. "But we'll put it in a drawer of th' desk. It won't take up any room an' it's got th' list of th' numbers of them ten new five-hundred-dollar bills. Just as they came from th' treasury, I reckon, seein' how th' numbers are consecutive. That makes 'em easier to remember. You can't identify hard money but you shore can identify paper. There ain't never two bills just alike." He looked at his two companions and smiled. "How well do you remember this list of numbers?" he asked.

"Shucks," chuckled one of the deputies, who answered to the name of George, "I don't remember none of 'em. I did, for a while, but not no more. All I can remember is that they are 1883 gold backs with Abe Lincoln's picture on 'em. I never in all my life seen a five-hundred-dollar bill an' I never expect to for th' rest of my days." He scratched his head gently. "It's funny that nothin' has ever been found out about that train holdup," he added with a faint smile of satisfaction. The robbery had occurred well to the east of them. It had taken place the summer before and well outside the jurisdiction of the sheriff of Twin River County, which meant that they need have no headaches over it. "They shore was a smart gang."

"Yes," gruffly replied the sheriff, "an' somebody else was right careless an' incompetent. They never should have got away. Th' Wells, Fargo men lost too much time by leavin' it too long in th' hands of th' local sheriff. By th' time they finally got on th' job th' scent was cold."

"Hell!" exclaimed the deputy in surprise. "That sheriff follered th' only tracks there was to foller, th' only hoss tracks in sight, an' he couldn't do no more than that."

"Yeah, that's right," grunted Hopalong sarcastically, "an' they turned out to be decoy tracks, an' when he come to th'

end of 'em he threw up his hand." He sat down before the desk and placed the wanted poster in a drawer before reaching for tobacco and papers. "They was made to be follered an' follered they was."

"Shore," admitted the deputy, grinning broadly. "That's why I said them fellers was right smart an' clever. It was a good trick an' it worked slick as a greased rope." His grin grew. "Them was th' only tracks there was, an' they just petered out an' didn't amount to nothin'."

Hopalong snorted and lit the cigarette.

"Train robbers have to get scarce an' travel fast an' far before they can even begin to figger they are safe," he said. "They wouldn't, couldn't go on foot. Therefore they rode hosses. If they rode hosses then they shore left tracks, an' th' real tracks wasn't found an' follered. That sheriff made a fool out of himself. They ought to have kicked him out of office."

"But there warn't no more tracks," retorted the deputy, getting a little red in the face. "They looked all around for tracks, an' th' only ones they found was th' ones they follered." "I don't care nothin' about that," persisted the sheriff doggedly. His face, too, was showing more color. "There must have been hoss tracks, th' real tracks that they made when they got away. I don't know where they was, but they was somewhere! An' if they wasn't near th' scene of th' holdup then they was farther away. Hell! Stands to reason, don't it? I would have put riders on both sides of that right of way—say a mile, two miles on each side of it—an' they would have rode in both directions parallel with th' track. One of them riders, sooner or later, would have found fresh hoss tracks, an' they would have been th' ones to follow.

After that it simply would have been a long chase with some shootin' at th' end of it. I tell you it was bungled."

The deputy slowly, thoughtfully scratched his head, and a grin slowly slipped over his face.

"Yeah, reckon yo're right," he admitted. "An' there was one complete description to help."

"Yes, there was," replied Hopalong, that description fresh and vivid in his mind. A man with a facial blemish should never become a criminal. "Th' conductor saw that passenger, but th' porter saw him better an' gave as good a description of a man as I've ever read. He asked th' porter questions; he checked his watch with th' porter; he was anxious to know if th' train was on time. Th' conductor remembered a scar, an' that was all, but th' porter told how it ran from th' chin to th' lobe of th' right ear, that it was thin an' looked like it had been made with a razor or a very sharp knife. He remembered th' little dots where th' stitches had been. Thanks to th' porter, I'll recognize that hombre right quick if I ever see him." He tossed the bedraggled cigarette into the top of a Royal Baking Powder can and reached again for the makings. Then he growled and looked up. "If Johnny or Tex or specially Mesquite had been with that fool sheriff *they* would have found th' real tracks an' follered 'em till they got that bunch!"

"Which reminds me," said the second deputy suddenly. "When's Mesquite comin' ' back ag'in? He's been away quite a spell."

"Don't know," grunted the sheriff. "When he gets good an' ready, I reckon. Tex an' Jane are good company, an' I figger th' Kid is havin' a good time with 'em."

The first deputy yawned frankly, and then an expression of interest came to his face. He hated to mention the subject, because the job might be given to him, but suspense had been gnawing at him, and he wanted the answer, one way or the other.

"What about that writ that's got to be served, up northeast outside th' county?" he asked. The territory he mentioned was unorganized and had been hooked onto Twin River County for judicial purposes. It would be a long ride and not too pleasant a one as he saw it. It would take a man several days to make the round trip.

"I'll serve it myself," replied Hopalong after a moment's thought. "I'm gettin' fed up with hangin' around town an' out on th' ranch. One day is just like another, an' all of 'em are dull. It'll do me good to get away an' have somethin' else to look at. You wasn't plannin' very strong on goin', was you?" he asked and then smiled knowingly at the look of relief on George's face. "I thought so. It's been half a dozen years since I saw Ben Peterson. I hate to call on him with a writ, but it's got to be served."

There came a sudden crack from the corral in the rear of the building, and Mike, the second deputy, stood up and looked out of the window.

"Huh!" he growled. "That fool hoss of mine still figgers he can kick down that fence. First thing I know he'll bust a leg." He turned and drew a sleeve across a moist forehead. He was looking at his boss. "You meetin' th' train tonight an' waitin' for th' mail?"

"No," answered Hopalong, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet. "I'll be ridin' off tomorrow to serve that writ that you both are so worried about. I'll take it with me



now, so I won't have to come in for it in th' mornin'. That'll save me considerable ridin'. I may be gone a week or even more. Anyhow, you boys look after things till I get back." He put on his big hat, shoved a folded paper in a coat pocket, and walked toward the front door. "While I'm gone you both might get busy an' catch them train robbers." He grinned as he reached the door. "So long."

"So long," came a double echo, shortly followed by gusty, double sighs of relief, but the sighs of relief did not sound until the sheriff had reached the tie rail.

George grinned and looked up at his brother officer.

"There ain't no use of both of us stayin' here," he suggested. "One's enough to meet th' train an' then get th' mail." He reached into a pocket and brought up a coin. "What you call?" The coin rang on the table as Mike named heads, and heads it was.

George jammed the coin back into a pocket and then shrugged as his cheerful companion turned to go toward the corral.

"I still say them robbers was right smart," he asserted. "They only left one trail, a trail of hoss tracks right straight toward that town an' nearly there. It just petered out an' didn't go any farther, an' when th' range was combed there was five local, missin' hosses, waitin' to be claimed by their owners."

"Hell with it," grunted Mike and slammed the door behind him.

## 2

HOPALONG left the trail at the ford and followed the faint trace which led off to the right, and after perhaps an hour's riding he saw the shack on the south side of a gentle ridge. Digging down into a pocket, he brought forth his badge of office, pinned it on his vest, and not long thereafter stopped before the door of the little rough house. As he swung down from the saddle he looked around to see a tall, loose-jointed, bewhiskered man turn the corner of the building and come toward him. He sighed. He had a mean job to perform and he found no pleasure in it.

"Hello, Cassidy!" said the ranchman, holding out a huge, grimy hand. A broad smile was on his face. "It's been a long time since I saw you. Yo're lookin' right pert an' hardly a day older."

"Hello, Ben," replied the sheriff, shaking hands. "Yes, it's been a long time, an' mebbly you won't be very glad to see me, seein' what I've come to do. I don't mind th' lead very much but I shore do hate th' paper."

"Shucks, I've been expectin' this," admitted the rancher with a laugh. He did not seem to be at all disturbed. "Only I expected it would be Buck Peters or one of his deppeties. I didn't know you was sheriff till I just saw th' badge."

"Well, I am, though right now I wish I wasn't," replied Hopalong. "How are you? How you been makin' out? How'd yore cattle stand th' winter?"

"I've been doin' right well," answered the ranchman. "Th' cattle got through th' winter right good too. I got some

brush-filled draws that save th' cows a lot of grief when a blizzard sets in." He gently scratched his cheek and grinned. "I meant to pay th' rest of th' money due on them cows without no lawsuit. My note was good when I made it, an' it's good now. I got my money's worth an' I ain't complainin', but you know how it is. Here I am, three, four days' ride from Twin River, an' doin' all my tradin' over in Hancock. It just slipped my mind without me meanin' it to." He laughed shortly. "An' mebbby it is just as well that it did: you've saved me a mean ride an' a week or more away from home, an' I reckon th' costs won't come to too much. But, dammit, let's go in th' house. Th' jug ain't quite empty yet. When I said you are lookin' pert I shore meant it. Come on an' let's quit wastin' time."

"Well, I feel kinda pert, too, which is better yet," chuckled Hopalong as he followed his host toward the house and into it.

They reduced the contents of the still adequate jug to the extent of two drinks, wiped their lips on the backs of their hands, and grinned at each other. Hopalong was beginning to feel that his unpleasant mission was not going to be as bad as he had thought.

"I'm alius glad to see anybody from over Twin River way," said the ranchman. "You Double Y boys, specially. Sometimes I get a mite lonesome out here. Once in awhile I visit with my nearest neighbor an' drive in to Hancock when I run out of supplies. You ain't ridin' back right away, are you?" he asked a little anxiously.

"Well, I figgered to," admitted Hopalong, "but I don't have to."

“Fine. That sets good on me,” replied the rancher, his smile growing. “It’ll be time enough, then, if you wait till after breakfast?”

“Reckon so, Ben. I’m right glad to learn you been doin’ so well. It’s makin’ me feel a lot better in my mind. I alius hate to slap a writ like this onto a man.”

The ranchman laughed.

“I been doin’ so well that I sold a thousan’ dollars’ worth of cattle last year an’ could easy spare ’em.”

“That’s mighty fine,” enthused the sheriff. He reached into a pocket and produced a folded paper. “I’m right glad this ain’t goin’ to make a lot of trouble for you.”

“What’s it figger up to?” asked the ranchman, well knowing the amount of the principal sum but not the costs.

“There ain’t no charge for my time, because it ain’t costin’ you nothin’,” said the sheriff. “I took this ride myself instead of givin’ it to a deppety because I kinda wanted to get away from town for awhile. An’ then, I didn’t like th’ idear of havin’ a stranger serve you. Now let’s see: it comes to three hundred an’ sixty-six dollars an’ no cents.”

“Hell! That’s damn near chicken feed! You wait a shake,” said the ranchman and left the room. When he returned he had a heavy bag in his hand, and it clinked pleasantly as he dropped it onto the table. It did not take long to count out the money in golden double eagles, make the proper change, write out a receipt, and have done with the business. The sheriff folded the paper, put it back in his pocket, and sighed with relief.

"I got an empty sack if you want it," suggested the ranchman, eying the small heap of coin.

"It'll weigh less in each place if I put it into several pockets," replied the sheriff. He picked up one stack of coins and spread them over his hand. "Bright an' shinin' an' brand-new," he said. "Looks like they ain't been circulatin' very long. There ain't a scratch on 'em, an' look at that millin', how sharp it is."

"I'm sorry that them that you have got have circulated as far as they have," laughed the ranchman. "I'd just as soon have 'em stay right here in this bag!"

Suppertime came, and the meal was prepared and eaten. The two men sat under the soft glow of a kerosene bracket lamp and talked of old-times and old-timers. Hopalong brought his friend up to date on the news of Twin River and the ranches around it, and then they discussed cattle and cattle prices. Then the ranchman chuckled and looked at his companion.

"That money I paid you was part of what I got for th' cattle I sold last year," he said. "Which I suppose you've guessed. They wanted to pay me in paper money, but I hadn't ever seen any five-hundred-dollar bills before an' wouldn't know a counterfeit from honest bills. Besides, a man might just as well be busted as to have bills as big as them out here in this country. They was mighty pressin', but I wouldn't take 'em."

"Shore," laughed Hopalong and laughed understandingly. "Some bartender would get sore as hell if you handed him a five-hundred-dollar bill to pay for a drink." Suddenly a thought popped into his mind. "You see them bills?" he asked rather sharply, his eyes on his friend's face.

"Shore. Saw two of 'em," answered the ranchman. "Why?"

"Oh, I was just wonderin' what a five-hundred-dollar bill looks like," chuckled the sheriff. "I'm gettin' along in years but I ain't never yet seen one of 'em. I was just wonderin' what they looked like, how they felt."

"I was kinda curious, myself," admitted the ranchman with a grin. "That's mebby why I looked so close while I had one of 'em in my paws an' mebby why I can remember 'em now." He scratched his head gently. "They was yaller backs. I remember that Old Abe's picture was on 'em. They looked mighty purty an' they warn't soiled a mite. Clean an' fresh an' they hadn't been folded, even, except down th' middle." He laughed softly. "Reckon mebby a man handles bills like them a mite more carefully than he does littler ones. Anyhow, I figger I should."

"Me too," chuckled the sheriff, trying to visualize that bank note. "When did you sell them cows, Ben?"

"Last fall, late," answered the ranchman. "I remember that right well because it came on to snow three days later an' I wondered how far them fellers had got by then. There was four in their party, an' they saved me th' job of deliverin'. All I had to do was to round up th' cattle an' vent 'em. They did take more cows than I liked though. I wanted to sell 'em all steers, but they wouldn't have it that way unless I took th' big bills. An' that made me kinda figger they was range stockin', instead of buyin' beef for drivin' to th' market."

"It does look that way," agreed Hopalong, thoughts playing tag in his mind. "What cattle outfit is closest to you?"

"Len Danvers, two miles north of th' trail you just follered comin' here."

"What direction did them buyers drive th' cattle when they left here?" carelessly asked the sheriff.

"West, along th' same trail," answered the ranchman.  
"Why?" "You hear 'em say anythin' about 'em aimin' to buy more cattle?" asked Hopalong, still carelessly.

"No, I didn't," answered Peterson. His quick glance was a little curious. "What's on yore mind?"

"Oh, just a mop of faded red hair that ain't near as thick as it used to be," answered the sheriff, grinning. "You remember what them fellers looked like?"

"Only in a general way," answered the ranchman, and he gave a careless general description which did not closely enough describe any of the men to be of definite value.

Hopalong had no reason to believe that the buyers of Peterson's cattle had been the train robbers, yet this thought had sprung quickly into his mind, and he found himself uneasy from suspicion. Only one of them had been seen and recognized, and the description of that man was clear and sharp in his mind. At the moment his suspicions had been aroused he had hoped that the ranchman could give him some information worth while. Now he grunted pessimistically, but determined to keep on trying.

Peterson was watching him curiously, and he was bothered by disturbing thoughts.

"What's on yore mind?" again asked the ranchman with increasing interest.

"Why do you figger anythin's on my mind?" asked the sheriff.

“Why, I dunno. It just struck me that there was.”

“I’m blamed if I know, Ben,” admitted Hopalong, sighing gently. “But I wish you’d taken th’ bills instead of coin.” He realized that he might have made a mistake in that remark and shook his head quickly. “No. You was right: they might have been counterfeits.” He laughed but without any particular mirth. “And, of course, they would be a nuisance. A man just can’t get bills of that size cashed whenever he wants to—but you knew that anyhow.”

Ben was steadily studying his guest, and he had become very thoughtful. His eyes had narrowed a litde.

“Yeah, I knew that,” he admitted and slowly added, “an’ I’m beginnin’ to figger that I made th’ right play from all angles. I’m shorer of it now than I was before.” He suddenly snapped his fingers. “By gosh, I suspicioned that they was counterfeit!” Then a strange look flashed across his face, a look of troubled anxiety. He looked his guest squarely in the eyes. “Was they?”

“I don’t know, Ben,” answered the sheriff. “I haven’t heard of any such bills bein’ out. Th’ chances are that they were all right.”

“Then how come th’ sheriff is interested in ’em?” countered the ranchman.

“I reckon that’s yore own idear,” answered the sheriff easily. “How many of ’em did you see?”

“Just two,” chuckled the ranchman, “an’ I’m mighty glad I didn’t take ’em. I’m figgerin’ that there was somethin’ about ’em that wasn’t right.” Again the strange, anxious look passed over his face, and he seemed about to say something more but instead pressed his lips tightly together and waved



toward a deck of cards lying on a corner of the table. "I've been playin' so much solitaire that I'm fair loco. What you say to a few games of Californy Jack before we turn in?"

"You say there was four men?" asked Hopalong. "Can't you remember anythin' about them, more than what you've said?" He paused. "What was th' color of their hair? Did they have beards? Were they all right-handed? Run back in yore mind an' see if you can't remember somethin' definite."

"By Gawd, there is somethin' wrong!" snorted Peterson, his eyes again narrowing. "Now you wait a minute. Hair? Huh. Black hair, all of 'em. Whiskers? No—just stubbles like my own. Don't remember none of 'em makin' a left-hand play. Well, that's that," he finished and again glanced at the deck of cards. "How about some Californy Jack?"

Hopalong was thinking quickly. If one of those men had had a big scar on his face the ranchman would have noticed and remembered it.

"All right," he said and then laughed. "Don't forget that these double eagles you just paid me ain't mine," he warned. "You ain't got a chance to get 'em back ag'in."

The ranchman laughed loudly, perhaps a little too loudly, as he drew his chair up to the table. He was worrying about a friend of his who had taken one of those big bills in payment for the cattle he had sold to those buyers, and his friend could not afford to lose five hundred dollars.

"You reckon I'd play twenty-dollar stakes ag'in a man like you?" he asked with a wide grin. "It's been six, eight years since I played cards with you, but there's some things a man don't forget—not in six years nor sixty." He shoved the deck out onto the middle of the table. "Two bits a game is about my size." "An' mine," agreed the sheriff. "Come on. High

deals.” Finally, when they had had enough of the game and had pushed back from the table, the ranchman looked around, his gaze stopping on the bed, and then got up and walked to where some blankets were lying on a shelf.

“Th’ bed is yourn,” he said.

“No, no! Keep yore own bed, Ben,” hastily replied the sheriff, holding out his hands for the blankets. “I’m used to rollin’ up on th’ ground an’ don’t mind it a bit.”

“What a polite liar you are,” chuckled the ranchman, hanging on to the blankets. “It’s been years since you done that. I’m still doin’ it from time to time. Th’ bed’s yourn.” He spread the blankets and slowly stood erect. “You said you didn’t know if them bills was bad or not, but I’m figgerin’ there was somethin’ wrong about ’em. Was they stole?”

The sheriff, the second boot off and still in his hand, looked up curiously.

“That’s somethin’ I don’t know,” he answered slowly. “Mebby they was an’ mebby they wasn’t. There’s plenty of money stole every day, I reckon. You figger I got second sight?” he ironically demanded.

“Well,” answered Ben, slowly scratching his head, “I dunno. There have been times when I thought mebby you had. Quite some few times.” He suddenly sighed and then forced a laugh. “Well, stole or not stole, I ain’t got none of ’em an’ I’m right glad of it.”

“You don’t happen to remember th’ letter that was in front of th’ big numbers that was on ’em, do you?”

“Hell, no! Why?”

“Oh, I was just wonderin’,” answered the sheriff. He finally dropped the boot.

# 3

MORNING CAME, and with it breakfast. Hopalong saw that his host was out of bacon, and he went over to his bedroll and took out what was left of his own slab. Peterson's face brightened as he saw it, and it was not long before breakfast was cooked and eaten. After this necessary ceremony had been performed the two men smoked a cigarette or two and wandered out to where the sheriff's horse had cleaned up the last of the allotted hay. Hopalong glanced at the watering trough, saw that it was partly filled, and knew that the horse had drunk its fill. Saddling, he was about to mount but checked the motions and tried the fastenings of his bedroll.

"You know, Ben," he said, his face crinkling with a grin, "I've sorta took a likin' to you, though Gawd knows I shouldn't. You got anythin' on yore mind that you'd like to tell me while you have a chance? Anythin' that you've been turnin' over an' over in yore mind since last night? Got any problems you'd like to have ironed out? Anybody you know got any money that might have been stolen? I can tell you th' law on stolen money if you'd like to know it."

"Huh!" snorted Peterson, trying to grin. "I know how much you've took a likin' to me. I had a sample of yore touchin' affection playin' Californy Jack last night." He pushed up one side of his Stetson and scratched gently and long under it where the band had pressed against his head. "I don't know nothin' about that kind of money an' I don't give a damn about any laws that I'd be told by a sheriff. I took gold an' I'm right glad that I did." He was, however, deeply interested in the laws concerning the possession of stolen money but did not dare to admit it. He suspected that it could be

recovered where found and thereby left himself in a state of anxiety which would have been cleared up if he had spoken.

"On my way out here," said Hopalong, "I saw some of yore cattle, I reckon. Anyhow, they was BP, combined, with th' B reversed. On th' right shoulder. That yore brand?"

"Yeah, that's mine," answered the ranchman with a laugh. "I knowed that I shouldn't have done it that way, because it makes it right easy for some damn thief to turn it into a Bar 8, with a standin' bar through th' middle. Is that what you was figgerin' to tell me?"

"No, I wasn't figgerin' to tell you that," answered Hopalong with a chuckle, "but it's true, ain't it? An' that ain't all a thief could do with it. What I was goin' to ask you was how you vented th' brands on th' cattle you sold them fellers. Did you put on a reverse brand or run a thin line through th ones that was already on?" He paused. "An' of course you gave 'em a bill of sale?"

"I use a stampin' iron an' can't reverse th' brands without turnin' 'em upside down," answered the ranchman. "I just took a straight iron an' lined 'em an' I shore gave a bill of sale with them facts stated. By gosh, Cassidy, I've shore enjoyed this little visit, an' it only cost me seven games outa eight, at two bits each. Hope you come up this way ag'in. When you ain't got so much on yore mind!"

"Well, it's a long way out of my ridin'," replied the sheriff, "but I'll shore drop in on you if I do get out this way an' hope that yore mind will be a damn sight easier than it is right now. But what's worryin' me is how I come to lose that one game. I must be slippin'."

"I cold-decked you," laughed Peterson. "I don't suppose you'll be spendin' any time over in Hancock?"

“Reckon not. Why?”

“Well, I’m near out of supplies, as you saw when you uncached yore own bacon, an’ I’ll have to be drivin’ in to town for a wagonload someday soon. I was just wonderin’ if you’d be there. I mebbly could cold-deck you ag’in.”

“Th’ cards over there wouldn’t be th’ ones you’ve been playin’ solitaire with for th’ last year, an’ their backs would be clean,” retorted the sheriff. “Why, Ben, I don’t know. I don’t see no reason for bein’ there very long. I’ll spend th’ night, of course, an’ figger to be ridin’ on ag’in in th’ mornin’, but if I do happen to be in sight when you get there, be shore to take th’ trouble to get acquainted with me all over ag’in. You ain’t supposed to know me an’ whatever happens you ain’t supposed to let it slip out that I’m an officer of th’ law. That’s a flat statement.” “Huh! Th’ more I think it over, th’ gladder I am that I refused to take any of them big bills,” said the ranchman, grinning widely, but the grin was a little forced. “Thank th’ Lord there ain’t no numbers on coins!”

“I’ll bet you two bits there are,” replied Hopalong, producing a quarter.

Peterson’s grin was real this time.

“Shore there are. Th’ date. Put that money back in yore pants an’ clear outa here before I high-tail it for my scatter-gun.” “All right, Ben, don’t shoot,” laughed the sheriff. “You got any word you want to send over to that Danvers hombre?” The ranchman was now wearing his poker face, and the question did not cause a change in expression. A prompt, flat denial might arouse suspicion. His thoughts were racing.

"Why, yes, I have; but I ain't askin' you to ride so far off th' main trail to give it to him. It ain't a mite important."

"Do I have to foller th' main trail on my back to his place?" sarcastically asked the sheriff. "Did you ever ride cross country?" "You don't have to foller th' trail if you know where to ride, but if you don't know you'll likely miss it plenty."

"Suppose you tell me how to go?" requested the sheriff, not at all needing any directions for such a simple journey. He remembered where that little-used side trail had turned off.

"By Godfrey, somethin' *is* wrong!" snorted the ranchman. "An' it ain't got nothin' to do with Len. I know that hombre. What you want to see him about?"

"I'd like to know on which side of his head he parts his hair," chuckled the sheriff.

"Hell! He ain't parted it in no place for th' last six, seven years!" exclaimed the ranchman. He laughed. "You really mean yo're goin' over to call on Len?"

"Mebby, an' mebbly not. As th' old sayin' goes, there's more'n one way to skin a cat," answered the sheriff.

"What you want to see him about? Mebbly I can answer for him an' save you some extry ridin'," said Peterson.

"Did he sell any cattle to them fellers, an' if so, what kind of money did he take?"

The ranchman was thinking swiftly, or rather he was continuing to think swiftly. He was a friend of both Len and Hopalong but he was not especially a friend of the *sheriff* of Twin River County in any matter which might mean trouble

for Len while that person had acted honestly. Stolen money? And bills had serial numbers, definite and unshakable identification. Len could not afford to lose that bill, although he might, later, when he tried to pass it. The ranchman had no great knowledge of law and, like many people, had an exaggerated idea of the powers of a sheriff. And besides, Len might put up a fight, and that against a man like Hopalong.

"That's easy. They wanted only cows from Len," he lied, still thinking fast. "Len needed all his cows his ownself to build up his herd, an' he wouldn't sell none. Then they dickered with him for one- and two-year-olds, beef steers, an' he was all set to sell 'em some. They played smart this time. They didn't have no gold when they called on him an' offered him one of them big bills. He was scared it was bad, an' it also was too big. He wouldn't take it. They said it was legal tender an' he had to take it. Len said that was all right in case he had agreed to sell 'em anythin' but he wasn't goin' to sell 'em even one damn head. Th' deal was off."

"Did they have any more hard money after they paid you?" asked the sheriff.

Ben's mind was now clicking like a swiftly rolling wheel over rail joints, and he answered without hesitation and in this case told the truth because it seemed to serve better.

"Shore they had! Th' sack they took mine outa was full of it."

"Did that sack have any printin' on it?" asked the sheriff, with another law in the back of his mind.

"Not on th' side I saw. Wait a minute! My mem'ry's gettin' better. That sack was turned inside out."

"That's right interestin'," commented the sheriff. "Did one of them fellers, now that yore mem'ry's improvin', have a knife



scar runnin' from his chin to up near his ear?"

"No. I woulda remembered anythin' like that. I didn't see no scar."

"Now, Ben, doesn't it strike you as peculiar that them fellers bought *cows* from you to help out their nat'ral increase, changed their minds a few miles farther on, an' really didn't care very much about nat'ral increase at all? They tried for cows but they would have bought beef from Danvers."

"That don't mean so much," retorted the ranchman, grinning again. "They would have taken young beef critters if Len would have taken one of them big bills. In two more years them beef critters would be three- an' four-year-olds. Then they would show a good profit."

"But they didn't buy 'em," objected the sheriff, watching his companion closely. He did not wait for the ranchman to reply. "What are cattle sellin' for up here, right now, on th' range?"

"Fifteen for yearlin's, nineteen for two-year-olds, twenty-three for three-year-olds," answered the ranchman with a laugh. "You figger on buyin'? If I'd thought so I'd have told you higher prices."

"What was they sellin' for last fall?"

"About th' same."

"Did Danvers sell 'em any of his cattle for more'n they was worth?" quickly asked Hopalong, another law in his mind.

"He didn't sell 'em none, as I've already told you, an' how th' hell could he get more than they was worth if he did sell?"

“What message did you have in mind for me to tell Len?” asked the sheriff.

“Nothin’ except for him to meet me at th’ main trail next Tuesday mornin’, so we can have each other’s company on th’ way to town. But that ain’t necessary. I’ll just drive right acrost th’ range an’ stop at his shack. I’ll wait for him to hitch up after I get there. He, too, oughta be needin’ supplies about now.”

“Well, all right. I’ll stick to th’ main trail,” said the sheriff. “I’ll see Danvers later on if it becomes necessary. So long an’ good luck, Ben.” He swung up into the saddle, waved his hand> and rode off, back the way he had come.

“Look out somebody don’t shoot you for a hoss thief!” yelled the ranchman, and laughed at the very impolite gesture which answered him. Then he slowly and very thoughtfully strode hack to the house, inside it, and sat down heavily on the nearest chair, there to continue his thinking.

# 4

HANCOCK, a mere speck in the distance, grew steadily larger but without improvement so far as appearance went. It was the standard collection of frame buildings, most of them small and guiltless of paint, from which rose the ugly second story of the hotel, its false front extending an additional story.

Hopalong sighed gratefully, for he had ridden all day and he was tired and hungry, but more hungry than tired. He had purposely forgotten to put the slab of bacon back in his bedroll and had left it under a tin dish in Ben Peterson's kitchen.

As the trail turned into and became the main street of the town he noticed the big stable behind the hotel, and it looked well kept up and substantial, even better than the hotel itself. Oh well, out in this country a man was only a man, but a horse was a horse.

Hopalong stopped in front of the hotel, swung down from the saddle, and let the reins drop down over the animal's head. It was not necessary to tie this horse, and he knew that it was securely anchored, thanks to the training which had been given it. He stroked the shining coat and nodded happily. It was prized horseflesh. The best horse which his friend Whit Booth could find on his horse ranch, among the several hundred fine, highly bred horses in his herds. It was also a gift expressing gratitude and appreciation for a job so well done by the Twin River sheriff's office that Whit had lost only a few animals from his herds, despite the clever rustling setup which at one time had threatened to pauperize him.

Hopalong strode slowly across the high, creaking board sidewalk and through the swinging doors, his careless, lazy glance taking in the entire room almost photographically. In general it was no different from most of other such rooms he had seen. They all seemed to have been cut pretty much from the same pattern. The imitation mahogany bar ran fully half the length of it, and the iron pipe which served as footrail was polished from the scrape of hundreds of boot soles. He already had loosened the guns in their holsters in case the jogging of many miles had wedged them in too firmly. The action had been purely a matter of habit, because he looked for no trouble here. While the town was inside his legal jurisdiction he never had seen it before and he did not expect to see a face he knew. He was just passing through on his way back to Twin River on his way home.

The little doors swung to and fro behind him, and he made his slow way to the bar, his heels clipping sharply, the soft jingling of one spur keeping a lopsided time with them. He stopped, placed a foot lazily on the iron rail, and rested an arm on the edge of the counter.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender, who also was the clerk, without much interest, although he had instantly noticed that this stranger wore two guns, both tied down. Such rigs were not uncommon.

"Corn liquor," answered Hopalong, smiling a little as he slapped dust from his clothes. His throat was dry from wind and dust. "I'll also have a long drink of water."

The bartender slid glass and bottle across the counter, shoved a tumbler of water after them, moved the bar cloth back and forth, and then leaned lazily against the back bar.

"You ridin' through?" he asked.

Hopalong poured a generous drink and shook his head. He pushed the bottle from him, tasted the liquor and downed it hurriedly, drank the water, and sighed with satisfaction. A queer thought popped into his mind: it took eight swallows to down a whisky glass of liquor, but a man could drink three times as much water in the same number of gulps. This was not drinking liquor, but the gulping kind.

"Not tonight," he answered and slid one of Ben Peterson's two-bit pieces toward the bottle. He pushed the big hat up higher on his head and rubbed the mark made by it on his forehead.

"I'm lookin' for bed an' board for myself an' my hoss," he said, reaching for tobacco and papers.

"Figgerin' on stayin' long?" asked the bartender, picking up the coin and tossing it into the cigar box near his hand. As he heard the ring of it he lost interest in it. He placed the bottle on the back bar and the tumbler and smaller glass under the counter.

Hopalong, giving a fleeting thought to the big bills which had been seen up in this part of the country, shrugged carelessly. After all, if any of those bills had been spent in the region round about sooner or later they should turn up in Hancock, its only town, and he was in no hurry to get back to Twin River.

"Oh, I might go on ag'in tomorrow or I might not," he answered. "I been doin' quite a lot of long ridin', an' a man gets fed up with it." He smiled a little at the thought which popped into his mind from nowhere: he very much liked to play draw poker. "Do th' boys up here play much draw?" he asked and grinned engagingly.

The bartender's impersonal expression became a little less so, and he squinted one eye slightly as an aid to thought. There might be quite a lot hidden under that innocent question. Professional gamblers were common throughout that country, and they did not all wear long-tailed coats.

"Oh yes," he answered carelessly. "They play quite a lot of draw," he amended. "But first you want a room for yoreself an' a stall for yore hoss."

"Yes, to both," said Hopalong, tossing the cigarette butt into a sandbox cuspidor.

The bartender picked up a short piece of metal rod and raised it to strike a heavy steel triangle suspended from the ceiling by a wire.

"Needn't call him," said Hopalong quickly. "I may ride around town a bit. I'll take my hoss around to th' stable, myself. I alius like to see his stall."

"All right," grunted the bartender, letting the rod drop onto the back bar and reaching for a well-abused account book. Pushing this across the bar, he took a bottle of ink and a pen from the back bar and placed them near the stranger's hand. This was not one of the regular run of hotels, after all: the ink was a fluid instead of a paste, and the pen was not corroded. When the register had been duly signed the counterman reached up to some keys hanging on hooks on a board, wrote a figure after the signature, blew on the ink to dry it, and put the book back where he had found it.

"I'm givin' you number two," he said. "Turn to th' right at th' top of th' stairs. It's away from th' street an' on th' only corner that gets a good breeze at night this time of th' year. You'll find th' bed comfortable, an' there ain't no varmints in it."

“That’s shore th’ way I like ’em,” said Hopalong with a laugh. “What do I owe you?”

“Huh. Wait a minute. Supper, room, an’ breakfast,” muttered the bartender. “Supper, stall, an’ breakfast.” He squinted both eyes this time and then named the sum.

Hopalong paid over the money and pushed away from the counter and then stopped.

“You got any more drinkin’ water?” he asked.

“Right here,” said the bartender, filling a large glass and handing it across the bar.

“Reckon I was plumb dried out,” said Hopalong. He sighed gratefully, handed back the empty glass, and drew a sleeve across his lips. “I guess I’ve had enough ridin’. Reckon I’ll take th’ hoss around back an’ then stretch my laigs. Supper at six?”

“That’s right—er—Mr. Jones,” answered the bartender, grinning widely. “That makes seven of you.”

“Huh?” asked Hopalong in surprise. “Seven what?”

“Joneses. There’s eighty-odd growed-up people around this town,” explained the man behind the bar, “an’ six of ’em are Joneses. You make ’em seven. Sometimes it’s a right handy name.”

The new Mr. Jones chuckled, glanced at the innocent but misleading register, and turned on his heel.

“Us Joneses are a large fambly,” he said over his shoulder and stepped out to the street, his left hand in a trouser pocket, idly toying with the badge of office lying there. As he

reached the horse he changed his mind about too much riding and now decided against walking.

The town was nothing to look at, just a few houses and stores, with the regular proportion of saloons, but there was one thing about it which engaged his attention. Just a little east of the main street and behind the hotel was a truck garden, too large, he thought, for the size of the town. It was neat as a pin and was thriftily growing various vegetables, and there was a chicken house in the middle of a fenced-in yard and hens busily scratching. On the far side of the garden was a field of grain, undulating gently under the caress of the breeze, and there was a stable with the familiar scent of horses and cows.

The slight frown on the face of the new Mr. Jones quickly turned into a smile as he suddenly realized that this man was not a nester in the true sense of the word. He had not located out on the open range, fencing in some precious water hole, where he would have been a thorn in the side of some cattle outfit, but he had closely shouldered the town and thus had become a distinct asset instead of a troublesome complication.

Mr. Jones looked forward with more eagerness to his supper, with this promise of fresh vegetables and eggs. He did not know that he was going to be very much surprised by the quality of the food and by the art of a cook who hailed, in the long ago, from the down-East state of Maine.

The new addition to the Jones clan was about to turn away when a movement caught his eye, and he watched the be-whiskered gardener step out of his barn, hoe in hand, and go to work in a patch of cabbages. Hopalong could see no weeds at that distance. He dismounted, watched where he stepped, and idled over to the worker. There was no reason



to make any particular noise as he walked, and he made none on the soft cultivated ground.

"You got a great layout here," he said pleasantly.

The man with the hoe jumped like a startled deer, and his hand flashed down to his holstered gun, and then, flushing under his tan, the gardener let loose of the weapon and tried to grin and not look too foolish.

"You shore startled me right down to my toes," he said and let the grin grow.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to," said Hopalong, grinning in turn. "Yo're quick as a cat. I just come over to see what you was doin'. I couldn't see no weeds an' I sorta got to wonderin'."

The gardener glanced down the row and nodded.

"It ain't just weeds," he explained. "You got to keep this soil light an' fine an' dusty. We don't get rain enough out here to get careless or shifty if we aim to have a crop."

"I savvy," replied Hopalong, nodding. "Does th' hotel get its vegetables an' aigs from you?" he asked hopefully.

"Shore," answered the gardener. "They serve right good grub in their dinin' room, though I do hold that they bile their vegetables too long. When a vegetable is soft all th' way through it's done, an' any bilin' after that don't improve it none." He pushed up his Stetson and rubbed gently where it had gripped his head, and Hopalong's glance at the hat told him that the headpiece had set its owner back at least twenty-five dollars. A quick thought passed through his mind: the man must be making money to afford such a hat. Oh well, he had known punchers to spend their accumulated wages of half a year on a saddle, and most of them seemed

to have gotten their money's worth every time they admired the fancywork.

"Yo're a stranger here, I reckon," said the man with the hoe, his lids narrowing the merest trifle. "Travelin' man?" he asked, pretty well convinced that the stranger was nothing of the kind. The two tied-down guns took care of that possibility.

"No, I'm not a travelin' man, though I shore do a lot of travelin'," answered Hopalong, laughing gently and shaking his head. "Too much of it for comfort. I buy cattle once in awhile, an' drive 'em over th' trails to th' railroads. I'm just lookin' over this part of th' country."

"Huh!" muttered the man with the hoe and slowly began to work it against the soil. "Then it ain't hardly worth yore while to stay very long in this town," he growled, and then, turning his back abruptly, went to work in earnest.

Hopalong wandered back to his horse and returned to the hotel. The bartender was leaning against the back bar and nodded to his new guest. "See anythin' worth while?" he asked with a grin.

"Well, I just saw th' farm," answered the new Mr. Jones, and a grin slipped over his face. "You bile yore vegetables too long," he declared.

"Mebby," replied the bartender with a short laugh. "I know where you heard that. Now lemme tell you somethin': we got a *cook*, a real cook. Just because a man can raise good vegetables it don't mean that he knows anythin' about cookin' them. You ever eat a New England biled dinner?"

"Don't reckon I ever did," confessed Hopalong with every indication of keen interest. "What is it?"

“Our cook not only knows how to cook,” continued the bartender, not heeding the question, “but he also knows how to put down good cuts of beef in pickle. There ain’t no better corned beef in th’ whole damn country than we got right here. We don’t pickle th’ heavy, lean meat. Just th’ brisket an’ other cuts that have lots of fat in ’em. You wait till you bite into some of it.”

“Corned beef?” muttered Hopalong thoughtfully. “I know what it is, of course, but it’s been a long time since I’ve had any. What’s th’ rest of th’ dinner?”

“Biled potatoes, cabbage, beets, turnips, an’ carrots,” answered the counterman very seriously. “You can plaster it with hoss-radish grated fresh before every meal. I don’t know what we’ll have for dessert an’ I don’t rightly care. When I get through leanin’ up ag’in a New England biled dinner I just ain’t got no room left for dessert. That’s th’ kinda grub it is. I eat all I can hold before time for dessert an’ mebby regret it a little later on.”

Hopalong’s grin had grown to alarming proportions, and he almost reverently placed his hat on the table beside him. He drew back a chair and sat down.

“I’m glad I stayed over for th’ night,” he admitted and softly laughed. “If that supper turns out like I hope I’ll mebby not be in very much of a hurry to be ridin’ on ag’in. Gosh! After a supper like that an’ mebby a friendly game of draw until bedtime-well, there don’t seem to be *nothin’* th’ matter with that layout.”

The bartender smiled and nodded.

“There’s usually a game goin’ on most nights,” he said. “Just a friendly game for small stakes. Most of ’em can’t afford to

lose very much. That is, of course, except th' Joneses, but they don't come a night a month. But when they do, it's a big game."

"Yeah?" asked Hopalong politely. "They can get faster action at studhoss."

"Yeah, but they like draw. An' that gardener you just met is one of 'em. Sometimes they get goin' for real money for a town like this." The bartender slid a cloth across the counter and became thoughtful. "I've seen a man lose or win five, six hundred dollars at a settin', but it's alius among th' Joneses." He smiled grimly, wondering if his companion also liked games of that size. "Nobody but th' Joneses want any part of a game like that. Not in this town."

"That's right steep for a town that don't seem to be makin' a lot of money," commented Hopalong, "but they keep it in th' fambly, sorta, seein' that only th' Joneses set in th' big games. Well, with th' same players playin' th' same game an' with no kittyin' out, it'll near average up in a long run of time."

"Reckon so," grunted the bartender and again dragged the cloth across a dry counter.

Hopalong leaned back and laughed outright.

"Well, I ain't a member of this Jones fambly an' I am one Jones that won't be settin' in no game like that," he said, and laughed again. "I play poker for th' fun of it, as much as for anythin' else, an' stakes like that ain't my idear of fun. No sir!"

The bartender still senselessly dragged the cloth along the bar, but he was thinking deeply. The new Mr. Jones looked like a professional gambler, no matter what he said, and big

poker games were fair meat for professionals, but he had no love for the local Joneses and he kept his mouth shut, hoping that his eyes and ears would provide entertainment for him during the next few days or weeks and he had no idea, at all, just how much entertainment would be provided eventually.

Hopalong began to laugh again and glanced at his watch.

The bartender looked at him curiously.

“I’m just figgerin’ on how much longer I’ll have to wait for that New England biled dinner,” explained the sheriff. “What else does yore cook turn out?”

“You ever eat smoked beef tongue with fresh beet greens?” asked the bartender, “or corned spareribs or pigs’ knuckles with sauerkraut? Or biled beef with hoss-radish sauce?”

Hopalong laughed contentedly and recrossed his ankles.

“I’ve had smoked an’ fresh beef tongue,” he admitted, “but not th’ rest of ’em.” He rested his head against the wall and laughed again. “I don’t figger that I’ll be in any hurry to leave here. I ain’t got no pressin’ business an’ I can eat as much poor grub as th’ next man—an’ I’ve had my fair share of it—but I can also eat my fair share of good grub, an’ mebbby more’n my share.” The thoughts behind his words were masked: he was building up a good reason, if he needed it, to remain in Hancock as long as he wished.

“Well,” said the bartender, grinning in sympathy, “I figger yo’re goin’ to get yore fair share of good grub tonight.” He pulled out a huge, key-winding watch and glanced at it. “If you ain’t put up yore hoss you might better get started. Th’ dinin’-room door opens in twenty minutes.”

The new Mr. Jones put his hat on his head, got up, and moved toward the bar.

“Twenty minutes, huh?” He pointed to the bottle beside the man behind the counter. “I don’t really need no appetite sharpener but, also, from what I’ve heard I want to be as hungry as I can get. I’ll have a drink with you.”

He had his drink; the man behind the counter acquired one more cigar, and then Hopalong walked out the front door, mounted, and rode around to the stable in the rear. As he swung down before the big door the stableman walked out to meet him. The only difference between this person and a bum was that he had a job and tried to keep it. The stableman reached out his hand for the reins.

“Put him in a corner box stall with two windows; give him half a feed of corn an’ all th’ hay he can eat,” ordered Hopalong, who thus indicated that he did not expect to call on the horse for a hard day’s ride on the morrow.

“All right,” said the stableman, who was looking at the animal with eyes shining with approval. He slowly led the horse into the stable, following along behind the stranger, who was critically looking at the stalls. One in a rear corner had two windows, and Hopalong flung a hand toward it.

“That’s th’ one,” he said and stepped back out of the way. “Take good care of him, an’ you won’t be sorry. He’s a right fine hoss an’ deserves th’ best.”

“He shore is, an’ he’ll get th’ best,” said the stableman. He stripped off the saddle, snapped a rope to the ring of the bit, and reached for currycomb and brush.

“Never saw a purtier animal nowhere. I’ll make him shine.” And the stableman went to work with a will as the stranger

walked slowly back toward the main door. Hancock. The center of a range which was becoming very interesting.

# 5

HOPALONG pushed back from the table and then paused to gain enough courage to stand erect. The bartender's promises had been well fulfilled. The corned beef had been tenderer and tastier than Hopalong ever had eaten; the vegetables, despite the pessimistic remarks of the gardener, had been perfectly cooked, and the horse-radish had been hot enough to serve a veterinary as a blister counterirritant. The diner, knowing that he had eaten too much, slowly got to his feet and walked out of the dining room, conscious of the knowing smiles of the others in the room. He slowly and almost grandly passed the end of the bar and sank gratefully onto a chair in a corner of the room and cautiously leaned back against the wall.

"P-h-e-w!" he blew gustily, and folded his arms across his stomach, only to quickly remove them and to let his hands rest on his thighs.

The man behind the counter regarded his guest studiously and allowed a faint smile to slip across his face.

"Were th' vegetables biled too much?" he asked with a chuckle.

"No," sighed Hopalong.

"Did you eat any dessert?" challenged the bartender, his smile growing.

Hopalong sighed again, rested for a moment, and then gently shook his head.



“What did th’ cook put in that hoss-radish?” he asked curiously.

“Nothin’ but hoss-radish,” answered the barman and laughed. “It’s hot enough when it’s fresh-grated an’ don’t need nothin’ else,” he added. After a moment, having received no reply, he glanced at the new Mr. Jones and saw that this person was beginning to drowse.

The bartender took time to study the stranger and saw a strong, rugged face, tanned and toughened and wrinkled by years of sun and wind. The long nose was straight and thin. The lips of the wide mouth also were thin, and there was chin enough. He had read somewhere that square, jutting jaws did not at all necessarily mean a strong and pugnacious disposition. The new Mr. Jones’s Stetson was pushed back on his head, its crown serving as a cushion between the head and the wall, and it revealed untrimmed, faded red hair. The bartender checked his appraisal as hard, sharp steps sounded on the sidewalk and came steadily toward the building, and he let his gaze settle on the little swinging doors.

The doors swung inward and closed behind a heavily whiskered man who headed straight for the bar. The newcomer nodded perfunctorily to the man behind the counter and spoke.

“Howdy, Sam.”

“Howdy, Abner,” replied the bartender, slowly starting his bar cloth on another futile journey along the counter. “Nice weather.”

“Nice weather?” repeated the newcomer, his voice climbing in pitch. “You wouldn’t reckon so, what with th’ dust an’

wind, if you rode th' trails I just got through follerin'. My throat feels like sandpaper."

"Been off buyin' more cattle?" asked the bartender carelessly.

"Yeah," grunted the bearded gentleman and then caught sight of the somnolent stranger leaning back against the wall in a far corner of the room. Without conscious thought his voice dropped to a mutter. "I want some of that scotch. You take what you want."

The bartender did not turn to the back bar this time but reached down under the counter for a bottle and slid it and a glass toward his customer, chose a dried-out cigar for himself, and placed it gently on the ledge behind him. He noticed that his bewhiskered companion was closely studying the drowsy man in the corner.

"It's been near a week since any of you fellers have been in town," he said.

"You was speakin' about th' weather," replied the newcomer, tilting the bottle and watching the level of the amber liquid climb higher in the glass. "As I just said, it's too *windy*." He downed the drink, stroked his whiskers, and put the glass back on the bar. "Is th' dinin' room closed yet?"

"No, but if it was it would open for you," answered the barman. He picked up the glass and plunged it into a bucket of water under the counter. Wiping it, he placed it on the back bar and then absent-mindedly put the bottle beside it. "We got New England biled dinner tonight," he said.

"I'll make a proper hole in it," replied the bearded gentleman, turning carelessly until the sleepy stranger was once again within the angle of his vision.

The stranger stirred slightly and turned his head the other way to put some work on the opposite neck muscles. The bearded gentleman's words had reached him but had awakened no interest. At this slight movement the man with the whiskers looked more closely at the man in the chair and then turned to face the bartender.

"Travelin' man?" he asked in a low voice.

"I don't know for shore," answered the bartender. "Anyhow, he's one more Jones."

"That so?"

"Uh-huh, or so he says," grunted the barman, moving the cloth again. He leaned forward after glancing out of the corner of his eyes at the man in the corner, and spoke in a very low voice. "I'm figgerin' mebbby he's a gambler."

"How th' hell do they smell out where money is?" asked the newcomer, thinking of the local Joneses and not of the town.

"Huh! How do buzzards know where there's carrion?" countered the bartender. "You boys don't have to let him set in."

"An' he ain't goin' to set in no games with us," growled the man with the whiskers. "Anyhow, we're too busy right now to come in to town." He glanced at the dining-room door. "Reckon I'll go eat. I'm plenty hungry."

At that moment the drowsy stranger in the chair moved his head slowly from side to side, bothered by cramped neck muscles, jerked it upright, opened his eyes, and slowly, confusedly looked about him. He sighed, grinned guiltily, and spoke to the bartender.

“Reckon I did eat too much,” he confessed, and his glance flicked to the stranger. Five feet eleven. About one hundred eighty pounds. Brown eyes. Bridge of the nose thin and humped. He wore his gun for a left-hand draw. But the whiskers? Hop-along smiled pleasantly and nodded. “Howdy,” he said.

The man with the whiskers not only ignored the speaker but turned his shoulder toward the counterman and walked slowly along the bar, around it, and disappeared into the dining room.

Black whiskers, shot through with gray, thought Hopalong. The man was left-handed too. Shucks, any number of men had black whiskers shot through with gray, and plenty of those had brown eyes. Yes, and that kind of a nose. Still ... he moved gently exploratory hands over his stomach and sat up straighten If a man had a knife scar running from chin to ear he could hide it with whiskers. Huh, that went for the gardener, too, but the gardener was not left-handed, and the gardener’s general description was not quite so pat. Peterson had said that none of the cattle buyers wore a beard. That did not mean anything because time enough had passed for the growing of beards. Huh. When a man started to get suspicious he could see about anything he wanted to see, but still, five-hundred-dollar bills had been shown up in this country. Well, he’d ride on again in the morning unless he stayed over a day or two to feast on this cook’s grub. He forced a thumb under the front of his belt and was glad that the feeling of fullness had eased off a trifle. He let the chair drop back on all four legs and looked at the bartender.

“How’s th’ cattle business doin’ in this part of th’ country?” he asked.

“Purty fair, I reckon,” answered Sam.

“Mostly small outfits, huh?”

“Yes, an’ no,” slowly replied the man behind the counter.

“They was all small outfits till last year, when th’ Jones boys started in to build up their herds. Between ’em they bought quite a passel of cattle.”

Jones boys. No, he was wrong—those others had been the James boys, back in Missouri. Only a damned fool would let his thoughts run along like that. The sheriff crossed his ankles and again felt of his stomach. If he were a cat he would have purred.

“Well, that’s th’ thing to do if you’ve got th’ capital an’ don’t have to borrow an’ pay cow-country interest,” he admitted.

“There’s more money in good beef critters every passin’ year. I’d rather increase th’ weight by buyin’ good, graded bulls than just add more cattle. I reckon th’ Jones boys have quite a ranch by now.”

“They didn’t throw in together,” corrected the bartender.

“They each run their own herds, except th’ gardener, of course.”

Hopalong leaned back and let his thoughts run on. Separate herds. That meant more brands, different brands. His suspicions came alive again. There were certain possibilities in such a situation. Last fall. Huh.

“They been up in this part of th’ country very long?” he asked idly.

“Five of ’em have,” answered Sam carelessly. “Then it turned out that there was another brother. That was him that was just talkin’ to me.”

“Yeah, an’ he’s about as friendly as a grizzly with cubs,” grunted the sheriff. “He shore ought to know me th’ next time he sees me. To hell with him. That was as good a supper as I’ve ever et.”

“Smoked beef tongue with beef greens tomorrow night,” said the bartender with a grin. “You beginnin’ to figger on stayin’ longer?”

“Don’t know,” answered Hopalong’with a laugh. “There ain’t no reason to, except th’ grub. If some of th’ boys drift in, turn out to be sociable, an’ I like their brand of draw poker for small stakes I might stay on a few days.” He rubbed his hand over his chin and frowned slightly. “I need a shave, I reckon.”

“Reckon you do. There’s a barber down th’ street,” offered the counterman. “Right next to th’ harness shop.”

“Well, if I hang around here for a couple of days I’ve got to get me a pair of socks an’ a clean shirt.”

“When you get ’em leave yore soiled clothes with me, an’ I’ll have ’em washed for you,” suggested the bartender.

“If that’s so then I better get th’ socks an’ shirt anyhow,” said Hopalong. “You reckon th’ store will be open now?”

“Shore. He lives in th’ back of it.”

Hopalong stood up and moved toward the door, and when he stopped walking he was in the little general store eighty paces up the street, looking across a counter at a weasened, little old man.

“Pair of socks, ten an’ a half, an’ a sixteen shirt. If you’ve got one with thirty-four-inch sleeves that’s th’ one I want.”

"There's th' socks," said the proprietor, transferring the articles from a shelf behind him to the counter. "I got th' shirt, too, an' th' sleeves are thirty-four, though that don't make no real difference as long as they are long enough. You can alius pull 'em up or turn 'em back." He tied up the package without wrapping it and then looked sourly at the double eagle his customer had placed on the counter.

"Ain't you got somethin' smaller?" he asked. "I hate to get cleaned outa change."

Hopalong picked up the gold piece and dug up a handful of smaller coins. He tucked his purchases under an arm, started toward the door, and then paused. Yellow backs with Old Abe's picture on them. A money sack turned inside out. And this town was the merchandising center of the surrounding country.

"I'm so loaded down with hard money that it's likely to make me even more bowlaigged than I am now," he said, grinning. "You speakin' about change made me think of it. If you've got some big bills I'll trade you hard money for 'em."

"I ain't got nothin' bigger'n twenties," replied the storekeeper. "Five of them do you any good? Paper money is scarce in this country, an' I don't like it."

Yeah, I'll take em, ' said Hopalong, dropping five double eagles on the counter. He rolled up the bills, pushed them down into a pants pocket, picked up the bundle, and departed. He had not cared anything about changing hard' money for twenties, for the bills he had in mind were much larger, but he had made the play; it had been called, and he had been forced to go through with it.

The bartender smiled when he saw the unwrapped parcel, reached behind him, and picked up a room key.

"You've got number two," he reminded, turning over the key. "Turn to th' right at th' top of th' stairs. If you feel like a little draw poker later on some of th' boys are almost shore to drop in, but I'm tellin' you ag'in that they play only a friendly game."

"Which is th' kind I'm lookin' for," replied Hopalong, moving toward the stairs. As he passed the dining-room door the be-whiskered Mr. Jones stepped through it and narrowly missed a collision. Despite the good dinner he had eaten, his temper had not improved, and he scowled angrily at the man with the bundle.

"Why th' hell don't you look out where yo're goin'P" he growled.

"Why th' hell don't you?" countered Hopalong, stopping in his tracks. "You ought to be belled! Can't you handle yore own feet?"

"An' yourn, too, mebbby!" snapped the man with the whiskers, also stopping.

"Mebby you ought to start mindin' 'em for me right now," said Hopalong, dropping the bundle.

"Mind 'em yoreself," growled the other. He continued to glare for a moment and then, turning on a heel, walked into the barroom.

Hopalong watched him disappear, overcame the temptation to go after him, and bent down to pick up the bundle. He was a law officer and was not supposed to start brawls, but sometimes a man was sorely tried. He slowly turned and climbed the stairs and went on to his room, where he removed his shirt, washed up, put on the new shirt and socks, rolled up the soiled articles in a tight little bundle.



While he was doing all this his mind was on the disagreeable Mr. Jones. He did not like Mr. Jones and he suspected that he was going to like him still less as time went on, and in this he was right.

Hopalong closed the door behind him, descended the stairs, and turned to the left as he entered the barroom to hand the soiled clothes to the bartender. Then he swung to his right and went over to his chair, the chair in the corner, where he had the room and its doors and windows before his eyes. This was just from force of habit. He hardly had seated himself before four men came in from the street, stopped at the bar for bottle, glasses, and cards, and then went on to a table in the rear of the long room. They were laughing and exchanging banter, and after they had seated themselves around the table they continued the banter, but made no move toward playing cards. One of them reached out, dragged a chair toward him, and placed it between himself and his companion on his right, and all of them, from time to time, glanced expectantly at the front door.

Hopalong watched them idly and then glanced at the street door at the sound of heavy steps. The unpleasant Mr. Jones let the little doors swing behind him, stopped at the bar for a drink, and then walked heavily back to the doors, through them, and out into the street. A moment later hoofbeats sounded suddenly and grew steadily softer. As they died out Hopalong yawned, stretched, and looked at the bartender.

"Which one of th' Joneses is he?" he asked.

"That's Abner," answered the bartender, and grinned. "Did he try to walk over you there in th' hall?"

"If he did he didn't get very far," growled the sheriff.

"He's a bad man to tangle with."

"Th' hell with him," retorted Hopalong. "I'm more interested in four-laigged cattle. Anybody in these parts sellin' any?"

"Most folks up this way seem to be buyin' 'em, instead of sellin'," answered Sam. "You buyin' too?"

"Sometimes I do," admitted the sheriff, hoping he would not have to buy any or back down. He had to have some kind of an occupation, and this was as good as any other.

"Huh!" muttered the bartender, curiously examining the man in the corner. "What kind might you be interested in? Cows for range stockin'?"

"No. Beef for th' market—heavy beef," answered the sheriff, noting that the men at the table were quietly listening.

"Well, you may find some here an' there," said Sam indifferently, "though you'll mebbby have to cover a lot of territory to get together a herd of real size. What trail margin you figgerin' on?"

Here was the opportunity to minimize the possibility that he might have to buy to save his face. Hopalong thought for a moment and then gravely replied.

"Four dollars a head," he said slowly.

"Great Gawd!" snorted Sam, and forgot to close his mouth. A subdued snicker came from the table. "You figgerin' to drive 'em around th' world an' mebbby back ag'in?"

"I can't do that because I've been told that there are two oceans in th' way," good-naturedly replied the sheriff.

"Critter for critter, it costs more to drive a small herd than it does to drive a big one, an' th' profits are smaller."

“Yeah,” retorted the bartender, beginning to enjoy himself; “an’ mile for mile it cost less to drive ‘em a short distance than it does a long one. Four dollars a head was th’ margin they figgered on to drive from Texas an’ th’ Gulf Coast away up to Montanny!”

“That’s right; that’s just what they figgered on,” admitted Hopalong, also enjoying himself. “I know that because I made some of them drives myself when I was a young man. They’d drive three thousan’ head three thousan’ miles for three thousan’ dollars, which left a man a profit, but I ain’t figgerin’ to drive three thousan’ head no three thousan’ miles. Besides, them days are over. They ain’t drivin’ ‘em up from th’ Gulf Coast no more. They’re drivin’ to railroads an’ ship ‘em th’ rest of th’ way. Even if they wanted to they couldn’t. Th’ Great Western cattle trail is blocked by fences, ruined by farms an’ towns, an’ in Kansas th’ farmers don’t have to fence against cattle unless they want. It’s th’ trail herd’s crew that has to keep th’ cattle out of th’ crops or find themselves fined or put in jail. Them days are shore over, an’ I’m right sorry.”

“Yeah,” said the bartender, “an’ because they only have to drive to a railhead or railroad town an’ put ‘em on th’ cars they ain’t figgerin’ on no four dollars a head margin no more. *Them* days are also gone!”

“Well,” retorted Hopalong dogmatically, “I’m still figgerin’ that way. A small herd is a damn nuisance, specially if you have to ride all over th’ country, buyin’ a few head here an’ a few head there. You got to have a chuck wagon, a driver, an’ a hoss herd.”

“Which means you won’t be buyin’ no cattle up here,” rejoined the bartender, vigorously wiping the counter.

“An’ that is somethin’ which remains to be found out,” retorted the sheriff. He slowly leaned forward and got to his feet. Walking to the bar, he hooked a high heel over the rail, leaned an elbow on the counter, and pointed a finger at the back bar.

“Gimme a drink of *that*” he said.

The bottle he was pointing at was the one which had served Mr. Abner Jones. He turned and faced the men at the card table.

“Will you hombres join me in a snifter?” he invited.

One by one they stood up and walked toward the bar while the man behind it was shaking his head and protesting that the bottle in question was the property of Abner Jones.

“Does he own that bottle? Has he paid for it?” asked Hopalong coldly. He knew the answer because he had seen Abner pay for each drink.

“No,” admitted the bartender, “but it’s reserved for him!”

“Mebby it was, but it ain’t any more,” replied Hopalong, looking Sam in the eye. “When you see him ag’in you can tell him that you had to serve it, an’ that you had to serve it to me. I don’t like Abner Jones’ whiskers, his front teeth, his coat, pants, vest, or hat but I reckon I’m goin’ to like this liquor right well, seein’ he reckons it’s his, even if it chokes me.”

He turned and smiled at the men along the bar.

“Fill up an’ drink hearty, gents. I figger this liquor is goin’ to be worth drinkin’.” He laughed. “I figger it’s goin’ to be *good* liquor.”

“It’s such good liquor that it’ll cost you four bits a throw,” said the bartender, his face flushed. “This ain’t no cow-town liquor.”

“How come, Sam?” asked Hopalong suspiciously.

“Because it’s imported all th’ way from Scotland! That’s why!”

“Then I reckon it’s worth four bits, but we’ll find that out right soon. Th’ Scots are a good breed, an’ they raise some of th’ finest cattle in th’ world. I wouldn’t wonder if they could do as good a job with liquor.”

The man who, at that moment, had the bottle looked at the label and read the name aloud.

Johnny Walker. Well, I’ve heard tell of it but never tasted it before. An’ Sam’s right: it says right here on th’ label that it is distilled in Scotland, but four bits a throw is purty high for my liquor. I’m glad somebody else is payin’ for this round.” He passed the bottle and topped his glass, rolling it gently, watching the oil cling to the sides. “Hah!” he exclaimed. “Looks good. Hum! Smells good, too, but a mite peculiar. What’s it got in it, Sam? You shore it ain’t spiled?”

“It ain’t spiled,” answered Sam in a growl. “An’ it ain’t got nothin’ in it but scotch liquor. That’s th’ smoke of th’ peat fires you smell. You can taste it too.”

Hopalong, the last man to tilt the bottle, raised his glass, sniffed at it, and then looked down the line. “Here’s luck an’ a long life,” he said, and let a few drops roll around his tongue.

The bartender grabbed the bottle, placed it out of sight under the bar, made change and pushed it across the

counter. He was frowning and he seemed to be worried about something.

Hopalong sipped his drink appreciatively, and nodded his head.

“This shore is tastin’ liquor, an’ not th’ gulpin’ kind. Smooth as molasses. Abner shore knows what to drink. Well, so do I, now, as long as I stay in Hancock.”

Endorsement ran quickly along the line, and lips smacked, and then one of the men pushed back from the bar and looked straight at the stranger.

“After that drink I hate to tell you that you won’t buy no cattle in this country if you stick to a trail margin of four dollars,” he said and then pushed back against the bar. “Set out another round, Sam,” he ordered, “but make it two-bits liquor this time. I was brought up on corn an’ I still like it.”

“Well,” said Hopalong with a laugh. “I ain’t figgerin’ to buy no cattle this summer. My contracts are about filled, but I thought I’d look around up here an’ learn what there might be here for me next year.” He chuckled and glanced at the bottle rapidly passing up the line toward him. “Don’t you boys like th’ peat smoke?”

“Yeah,” came the slow reply from the man who was buying, “but it’s too high-price for me, an’ I also like my health. I want no trouble with Abner, damn him.” He raised his glass. “Down th’ sump!”

When the last man had made it all square, and not one of them had much more than covered the bottom of his glass, one of the four craned his neck and looked along the bar at the stranger.

“We’re figgerin’ on playin’ some friendly draw poker,” he said with a happy grin. “This is Satidy night, when we all come to town for our reg’lar sewin’ bee. It’s a kinda fambly affair, but if you feel like settin’ in on a five-an’-ten-cent game we’ll shore be glad to have you.”

“That’s right kind of you,” replied Hopalong, slowly looking at the others. “Th’ stakes suit me all right. A man don’t have to think so hard in a friendly game. I’m glad to meet you fellers an’ expect to have a very pleasant evenin’. Also I’ll try to win yore pants. You other boys willin’ for me to set in?”

The replies were affirmative and hearty, and the five moved slowly from the bar and toward the table in the rear of the room.

# 6

THERE WAS no question about the game being a friendly one, and one played by friends, and by friends who had played together so much—with the exception of Hopalong, of course—that they seemed to be able to read each other's minds. The stakes were too small to give much value to a bluff, but to these ranchers, living and working on a shoestring, they were as high as they could afford; and it was not long before Hopalong, sensing this, entered into the spirit of the game and fought for every chip. He remained in every hand and enjoyed the game as much as any he ever had played; and he was establishing contacts and being accepted without undue suspicion. This one evening might save him miles of riding.

A wagon rolled and creaked along the street, and the sounds of ridden horses came more often. It was Saturday night, and the little town was slowly filling, slowly coming to life.

As the cards were being collected for a deal the man at Hopalong's right looked at him and smiled.

"What was it you said about buyin' cattle?"

Hopalong smiled in turn.

"I'm not anxious to buy any right now," he replied. "I got all I need for this year. You might say that I'm lookin' over th' ground for next year's drives. That's why I told th' bartender I was figgerin' on a four-dollar-a-head trail margin. If I could get a small herd for that figger it might pay me to send in an outfit an' make th' drive, but I really don't want any."



A whoop sounded outside, followed by a Rebel yell, and several men pushed through the swinging doors and headed for the bar. There were more voices in the street and more hard heels on the sidewalk.

"You know what range prices are up here?" asked the man at the right.

"Yes," answered Hopalong. "They're too high for a driver, an' I won't pay 'em, but there'll be plenty of time to talk about prices next year."

The man on his left shook his head slowly.

"Even if you offered 'em I doubt if you could pick up many head," he said thoughtfully, "except, of course a few four-year-olds from ranchers who needed th' cash, an' there ain't enough of them to make up a really worth-while drive. I figger th' Jones brothers will be doin' their own drivin', an' th' rest of us don't hardly count. Everybody up this way who has any money seems to be buyin', except here an' there where a few of us are hard pushed to get beans an' bacon, an' then he'll be more likely to keep his cattle an' try to hire out for a few months an' get his grub money that way. An' you couldn't buy anythin' under four-year-olds from th' Jones boys, even if they didn't make their own drives."

"I don't get yore slant," objected the sheriff, shaking his head. "Some of it just don't make sense. Why refuse to sell a four-year-old if th' price is right? It's growed-up beef, ain't it?"

The man across from him finished shuffling and grinned.

"There's a feelin' in this part of th' country that beef prices are goin' to be higher next year. I've heard that th' Jones brothers are shiftn' their buyin'. Last year they wanted

nothin' but young cows an' went a hell of a long way off to get most of 'em; now they'll buy young steers if they can get 'em at their own prices. Ill bet you that Abner just came back from lookin' at that kind of cattle an' he mebbly bought another herd."

"Is he their buyer?" asked Hopalong carelessly.

"Yes. Anyhow, he's th' most active."

In a few minutes the hand was over, and the next dealer scooped up the cards and squared them for the shuffle.

"I been hearin' considerable about them Joneses," said Hopalong, reaching for tobacco and papers. He was glad the conversation had taken this turn and hoped to keep it there if he could do so without arousing suspicion. "They must be big outfits for folks to talk about 'em so much."

More wagons rumbled past the front door, and more men entered the room. The talk was growing louder and more boisterous but was friendly.

"They ain't so big yet," said the man on the left, "but they all are a lot bigger then they was last spring. Up to then they was just shoestring outfits like th' rest of us but late last summer they all began to buy cattle, lots of cattle. They started in buyin' cows an' then had to shift to young stuff for future beef. We didn't have no idear that they had so much money. As a matter of fact, we was damn surprised."

"I begin to understand why you all reckon prices will be higher next year," said Hopalong, frowning and thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "Th' Jones boys are plungin'. They're buyin' heavy, an' mebbly too heavy. To buy, you first got to have th' money. Usually that means you got to borrow it an' pay reg'lar cow-country interest for it. Ten per cent. Often

compound. A man can count on a reg'lar, natural increase of about twenty per cent if he has a mixed and properly rounded herd. That means he'll have twenty per cent more cattle every year. Fortunes have been made on that formula, an' fortunes lost. That's all right if th' market holds an' prices don't *go* down, but th' whole West is strewed with ruined cattlemen who borrowed heavy, paid ten per cent interest, an' later found out that everybody else had been doin' th' same thing, which meant overstocked ranges and just no market at all when th' next year came around."

"That's right!" yelled a voice from the bar. "That's right as hell!" An unwashed, frowsy man, his blue jeans shoved carelessly into heavy, worn cowhide boots, clomped over to the table. "That's right, I tell you! I know it's right because I was one of them fools back in '73. Now I'm workin' for a damn poor livin' an' gettin' older every day."

He rocked back on his heels, recovered his balance, and wiped saliva from his lips and chin with the back of a knotted hand.

"That's right! You hombres best play it th' other way. 'Stead of borryin' money to put into cows you lend th' money to th' damn fools that want to borry. Just look back at th' prices of th' last five years. Ever know 'em any higher over a five-year stretch? Huh? Did you? No, by Gawd, you didn't. I know what I'm talkin' about but I learned it too damn late. He's right, I tell you." He wiped his lips again and looked down at the cards. "Sorry, friends, don't want to spile yore game. But he's right, right as hell. So long, boys. So long. Didn't mean for to bust in like this. So long, an' start sellin'."

His weaving departure was watched in silence. The ranchers, their cards face-down in front of them, were looking at each other with serious expressions on their faces, and each was

running back in his mind to remember cattle prices for the past five years. Their glances became uneasy and then turned to follow the progress of the drunken visitor, and just in time to see the bartender shake his head violently and point toward the door. The drunk turned unsteadily, and unsteadily moved toward the street. The litde swinging doors closed after him.

For a moment the room was silent, and then the noise began to climb again, but now the conversations and the arguments were based on a new subject, and here and there heat began to show in the words.

Hopalong smiled thinly as he looked at his companions.

“Th’ Jones brothers, buyin’ heavy like that, must have been a big help to some of you fellers around here,” he said, picking up his hand.

“Not a hell of a lot,” grunted the man on his right, spreading the cards in his huge hand. “They didn’t buy anythin’ from us. When they came to us they didn’t want nothin’ but cows an’ they’ve got more brands, vented, of course, in their herds than I ever saw before. An’ they *don’t* like visitors.” He watched the man on his right, saw the bet, folded his cards, and placed them on the table in front of him.

Hopalong, his cards already face-down on the table, also saw the bet and then rolled and lighted another cigarette. The man across the table showed the best hand and raked in the pot and then pushed the cards away from him. Hopalong picked them up, shuffled, offered them for the cut, and swiftly dealt.

“My name’s Robbins,” said the man on the left. “An’ Mr. Robbins is openin’ for a white chip. I aim to make this a game of rough-an’-tumble before I get through.”

"I'm climbin' aboard," said the next player. "An' my name's Jordan, stranger. I'm th' FXJ, over Butte Spring way—hah! damn if that ain't poetry. An' right now I'm damn glad that nobody would lend me any ten-per-cent money to buy some cattle I wanted to get this spring."

He watched the man on his left and then turned to Hopalong.

"Robbins, here, is over on Plum Creek, about eight miles from me as th' crow flies. He's also between me an' th' Joneses, an' I'm right glad of it. Their tempers are too short an' their gunplay too good to suit me."

"George Robbins," said that person with a grin, continuing his introduction of a moment before. "Owner, outfit, an' cook of th' great GR ranch. I must have all of two dozen critters, not countin' in two hosses." He laughed. "An' nobody would lend me any money either. I'm too well knowed."

"I'll get you fellers' minds off of who you are," said the man across the table and a little to Hopalong's right. "There she is, all square, an' here is where she climbs. I alius like to back four tens." He scowled, but it gave way to a grin as he looked across the table. "I already savvy that yore name is Jones," he said. "Mine's Glass. Jim Glass, an' I also have a couple dozen head down on Little Hoss Creek. I'm th' JG an' I got as many hosses as Robbins."

"You bet that hand like that," said a friend on his right, "an' yore brand will be JB—just busted." He chuckled and looked across at the stranger. "Call me Bud Wilson, an' I'll answer. Call me by my right name, an' I'll mebbly start shootin'. BW is my mark. She's up ag'in. I alius like to buck four tens."

Hopalong saw the raise and called. A few moments later he watched Glass rake in the pot on the strength of three nines.

The game went on for an hour or more, and in that time two other games had gotten under way along the wall, and they were very noisy. The noise had steadily increased, both inside and out, and a piano sadly in need of tuning was somewhere being played by someone who possessed more strength than skill. It became increasingly difficult to pay attention to the game, and it just died a natural death. The players sat back at ease, the cards lying in the center of the table, and took the bottle as it passed.

Robbins studied his glass and then looked at Hopalong.

“You figger that drunk was right?” he asked thoughtfully.

“I don’t know if he’s right about next year,” slowly answered Hopalong, “but he shore was dead right about th’ last five years.”

Robbins’ eyes narrowed shrewdly.

“Mebby that has somethin’ to do with you askin’ for a four-dollar trail-herd margin?” he suggested. “Mebby yo’re aimin’ to get ready for a fall in prices?”

Hopalong laughed and shook his head.

“If I’d figgered from that angle I reckon I wouldn’t have been thinkin’ of gettin’ trails herds together. I shore would wait, anyhow, before makin’ any contracts. It may not be next year, but from now on th’ man who tightens his belt an’ gets out of debt may turn out to be a right smart hombre.”

“There’s somethin’ in that, as th’ monkey said when he put his paw in th’ beehive,” said Glass. “That drunk come purty nigh to spilin’ my evenin’. Anyhow, he’s give me plenty to think about.”

“An’ th’ Jones boys are still buyin’,” said Hopalong, to get back to a subject which had more interest for him. With this thought of lean years coming, with its threat now in the minds of his companions, he felt that he could ask more questions than before and still keep them apparently idle and innocent.

“Yeah, but they had to go away for ‘em,” answered Wilson after a pause. “They been buyin’ heavy, between ‘em. An’ that damn left-handed Abner is back ag’in, which means, I reckon, that he’ll be on th’ trail purty reg’lar if he ain’t spent all their money by now. By gosh!” He hesitated. “Wonder if I can’t round up a hundred head or more an’ make him an offer?” “How do they pay?” persisted Hopalong. “Cash? Notes? Part cash an’ th’ rest in notes?”

“Cash right on th’ table,” answered Robbins. “Purty, yaller cash. Double eagles that look bran’ new. They got a lot of critters too. That is, Matt Jones has; George too. I don’t know much about th’ others because they lay too far west of me, over in th’ rough country, beyond th’ old emigrant trail. Some of their cattle cross over to th’ Plum Creek side of th’ divide, but not many. Not enough to bother about.”

“Matt Jones is a dozen miles north of here,” said Wilson, finishing his drink. “Ed is northwest of him, an’ Tom is northwest of Ed. George is northeast of Matt. Between th’ four of ‘em they just about surround that whole section of rough country and they shore do control it. If yo’re lookin’ for trouble let ‘em catch you ridin’ acrost it. I don’t blame ‘em for ridin’ line on cattle though—there’s good water in them arroyos an’ draws an’ lots of grass; but if they let other folks’ cattle get in there they’ll have a tough time gettin’ ‘em out someday. If they keep on buyin’ an’ have any luck at all with their nat’ral increase th’ day shore will come when they’ll

need all that section for their own critters. Reckon that's why they're so damn touchy about others ridin' over it."

"How big outfits do they run?" idly asked Hopalong, and the answer made him glad that his face had enjoyed a fine poker training.

"That's th' funny part of it," said Glass. "They don't run none."

"I'd say that is funny," commented Hopalong, his thoughts racing. This matter should be pressed. "But, of course, they can ride line, after a fashion, by themselves, an' alius hire crews for th' roundups."

"But they don't hire no roundup crews," said Wilson. "They do their own roundups. Takes 'em a lot longer, but they do it. Before they started buyin' it wasn't so bad, but if they keep on buyin' they'll not be able to keep that up; they'll have to hire crews. Why, damn it, they do their own cookin', like us shoestringers here."

"What's on th' other side of their range?" asked Hopalong idly as he reached for tobacco and papers. No outsiders working for them. No one welcomed on their ranges. No one to see what was going on, if anything, and to blab about it. Many brands in their herds. Suddenly, to everybody's surprise, they had plenty of money and had begun to buy cattle. And that was last fall.

"I ain't rightly shore, but I reckon it's damn pore range, even if you could call it that," answered Robbins. "An old-timer told me it was plumb useless." He turned to Glass and Wilson. "I ain't seen Peterson or Danvers for a coon's age. Wonder why they don't come in to town on Satidy nights?"



"They don't come in till they need supplies," replied Glass. "They just hole up."

"Only when they need beans, bacon, an' flour," chuckled Jordan. "They live too far away, so they say."

"Hell!" snorted Robbins. "Me an' you both live farther from town than they do."

"Well, me an' you ain't got sense enough to stay home," laughed Jordan. "Be time enough for us to hole up when winter hits us. Anyhow, they ain't what you might call reg'lar members of th' fambly. Which reminds me that I really do live a hell of a long way from here." He pulled out a huge silver watch and looked from it to Robbins. "I'm headin' for home, George. You comin' ' with me?"

Robbins nodded, stood up, and pushed the chair behind him.

"Shore am," he answered. He nodded to Glass and Wilson and stepped toward Hopalong, his hand outstretched. "Glad to have met you, Jones. Hope yo're here next Satidy night. You might get adopted into th' fambly. Well, good night. Good night, boys. Come on, Bud."

Hopalong shook hands with them both and made the appropriate reply. He glanced quickly from face to face.

"Any signs of rustlin' around here?" he quietly asked.

"Naw," answered Robbins, somewhat surprised. "I just finished my two-by-four roundup an' didn't see no signs of anythin' like that." He looked around inquiringly, and affirmative nods replied to his unasked question. "Nobody's

been botherin' any of us, but it wouldn't hardly pay 'em. We ain't got cows enough to temp anybody."

The two ranchers, their good nights said, turned from the group and pushed slowly through the thinning crowd, nodding to man after man, making their way to the door. Hopalong pushed his chair back to the wall, tilted it, and raised his feet from the floor. His two companions followed his lead, and then the idle and desultory talk helped time to slide past until Glass finally leaned forward, dropped the front legs of his chair to the floor, and yawned.

"I'm headin' for my shack," he said, yawning again and looking inquiringly at his fellow ranchman and neighbor.

Wilson's chair smacked against the floor, and he lazily stood erect. He stretched and yawned again.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Time to be gettin' along." He grinned at Hopalong. "You didn't do very well ag'in th' fambly tonight, did you?" he asked, jingling a pocket suggestively. "We kinda run our brand onto you, huh?"

"Well," chuckled Hopalong contentedly, "I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but you did scorch me a mite. Reckon you all ganged up on me, but I ain't complainin'. I've had a good evenin' an' I'm willin' to pay what it cost me. Hope I'm on hand next Saturday night. You see, I've been leadin' you on an' studyin' th' game you fellers play, an' sometimes eddication costs money. Next time I'll take th' pants off th' lot of you."

"Well, we're glad to have met you an' hope to see you ag'in," said Glass. They shook hands, said their good nights, and began to push their way through the lessening crowd. They nodded to the bartender, exchanged a few words of

banter with him, and then let the twin doors swing gently to and fro behind them.

Wagons again were rumbling along the street, the sound of Hoofs had increased, and the noise of the town was steadily lessening. Another Saturday night had slipped into the past, and men were going back to their shacks to face another week of monotony, but many of them were turning over in their uneasy minds what the drunk had said about a break in beef prices.

# 7

HOPALONG again shoved both feet against the floor and tipped back against the wall, his mind busily going over everything he had heard. He considered the big bills and the newly minted gold coin and got nowhere, although he strongly suspected that Len Danvers had accepted one of the bills. It was entirely possible that more than one man in this part of the country had accepted big bills—but, was it? If the Jones brothers had taken part in that train robbery, would they have been careless enough to spend the stolen bills so close to their ranges? Yet that is what they did if Len Danvers had been given one of them. Perhaps the possibility of the numbers' being noted somewhere had not been thought of. However he looked at the problem, it remained a puzzle.

Consider the amount of the stolen money. Twenty-five thousand dollars in gold coin had been taken from the train, and five thousand dollars in the big bills.

They must have had pack mules to carry all that coin—but wait a minute. He reviewed the one occasion when he had been called upon to help carry and guard several sacks of gold coin from the railroad depot in Twin River to the Twin River bank. He remembered that one sack had been marked as containing five thousand dollars. He had lifted it and he had carried it. Why, it hadn't weighed anything, hardly. Perhaps twenty pounds, more or less. Huh, twenty-five thousand dollars in gold would not bother a good saddle horse very much, and if it had been split up between five riders their horses would hardly have known that they were carrying it. Last fall the Jones brothers had shown that they had plenty of money, and they had been buying about the

same kind of cattle that Ben Peterson had sold them. The sack had been turned inside-out. And the two big bills had been Abe Lincoln yellow backs. How long he had been thinking he did not know, but suddenly the lack of noise got through to his mind.

He looked up and around the room. It was quiet because it was practically empty. Only three men remained of the earlier crowd, and they had just downed their good-night drinks and were turning toward the swinging doors. He glanced at the bartender, and the expression on Sam's face brought him to himself. He looked at his watch and was surprised to see what it told him. The chair legs hit the floor, and he stood up and stretched.

"Reckon you want to close up," he said, moving lazily toward the bar.

"Time for it, I reckon," replied the bartender evenly. "It's been a long day, an' I'm tired, though not sleepy. That's funny, too, because I ought to be. I just want to get my weight off my feet."

"I don't wonder," said Hopalong, planting one foot on the rail. "That was a nice bunch of fellers, an' I shore had a pleasant evenin'. Have one with me to go to sleep on?" he invited. "How about samplin' th' sacred bottle of peat smoke?" He grinned. "Yo're off duty now, an' th' boss won't care."

"Yeah, I'm off duty, an' th' boss won't care because I'm th' boss, an' I work a damn sight harder an' longer than any of my help." Sam looked toward the door and then reached under the counter, and he grinned as he straightened up with the square bottle which had crossed an ocean and more than half a continent to cause trouble in Hancock. The

glasses filled, Sam raised his in a full-arm salute and laughed.

“Here’s that they take yore shirt next time,” he said. “They shore are a nice bunch and they play a tight game but they got to.”

“Don’t reckon I’ll be here next Saturday night,” replied Hopalong, raising his own glass. “May yore shadder never grow less.”

“Same to you,” responded the bartender and proprietor of Hancock’s only hotel. He sipped his liquor appreciatively until the glass was empty and then dried his lips with the back of a hand. Placing the glass on the bar, he looked curiously at his guest.

“You ain’t figgerin’ on ridin’ on tomorrow, or rather today, after bein’ up till this hour?” he asked.

“There ain’t no reason to hang around here,” answered Hopalong thoughtfully, “though th’ lateness of th’ hour does sorta stand in th’ way of ridin’. I got a purty fair idear of th’ cattle conditions in this part of th’ country in case I want use of it next summer, but it ain’t very promisin’. Too many small outfits, an’ nobody seems to be sellin’. Not enough, anyhow, to make it worth my while. Th’ Jones brothers seem to be out of it. I heard they figger on doin’ their own drivin’ next year.”

“Mebby they’ll buy if it’s th’ right kind of cattle,” suggested the bartender. There was a strange expression on his face, and his eyelids were partly closed. He dragged the cloth slowly back and forth across the bar.

“Huh. That’s mebbly an idear,” replied Hopalong. He placed the glass on the bar, picked up his change, and looked up.

“Yeah, that’s an idear. I may come back later. Mebby I can sell some cows up here but I’m a mite doubtful. What that drunk said tonight has been in my mind for nearly a year before he said it. Whatever goes up must come down. I’m a mite fearful about next year. Hum, mebby I’ll be up here next year to buy cattle an’ buy ’em damn cheap. Take my pick an’ name th’ price. I know where to hold ’em, too, with Pawnees for herders at ten dollars a month an’ found.”

The bartender pushed out the bottle again.

“Have one on me. A good, stiff drink is a good thing to go to bed on, an’ this liquor’s damn near velvet.” He waited and then did the same with his own glass. “Would you trust a crew of damn Injuns to herd for you?”

“Hell, yes. There ain’t no better herders on earth th’n some Pawnees I know about.” Hopalong took a sip and continued. “Wonder if you happen to have any real large bills that you’d swap for hard money? An’ yo’re shore right about this liquor bein’ velvet.”

The bartender was shaking his head.

“No. We don’t see much paper money up here, an’ what I do get hold of I use for payin’ for my liquor shipments.” He instinctively dragged the cloth over the counter and then, tossing it onto the back bar, moved slowly around the counter and walked to the door. As he returned from locking the rear door he put out the four big, hanging lamps and went behind the bar again. He sighed from fatigue. “Funny how a man gets so tired that he can’t sleep. My laigs an’ feet shore do ache, an’ they keep right on achin’ after I get into bed.”

Hopalong slipped his foot from the rail, turned, and moved toward the stairs. He, too, was tired and he had been sleepy

not long before but now he was wide-awake.

“Good night,” he said. “Reckon I’ll miss breakfast.”

“Wouldn’t wonder,” replied the bartender. “Good night.” He turned out the big lamp hanging over the right end of the bar and then the other one. Only one lamp remained lit, and that was a bracket one near the hall door. He listened until he heard the stranger move across the floor of the upstairs room and then, the place closed for the night and himself alone, he smiled with deep anticipation and picked up a whisky bottle and a glass. This was the moment he had been looking forward to all week long.

He took bottle and glass and went to the nearest table and sat down. Filling the glass brim-full, he downed the liquor; and then he filled it again and downed it. He had learned that a little liquor keeps a man awake but that plenty of it would hit a man like a club. Again he filled and emptied the glass and was on his way to a drunk, if he waited for the stuff to take effect, but he did not wait. Turning down and blowing out the lamp near the hall door, he felt his way toward the stairs. By the time the liquor hit him he would be in bed and on his way to several hours of oblivion. This was the one night in the week when he slept straight through.

Two doors away from the bartender Hopalong Cassidy lay awake, his mind refusing to quit racing through a turmoil of clashing thoughts and suspicions. Some of the questions frankly challenged him and were too tough for him to answer. He could not get a proper hold of them. It was all right to be suspicious, for that was part of a sheriff’s job, but it was something entirely different to become a damned fool. Anyhow, he could always come back to Hancock if there was a reasonable excuse to make the ride. He well knew the



powers and limitations of his office, and the latter were not too pleasant to think about. He knew the laws concerning stolen money and the limitations in this, also. He had turned up some vague and suspicious circumstances, but perhaps they were suspicious because he was, and always had been, suspicious. He would go back to Twin River but he would go with a mind ready-cocked and alert for anything which might develop. And he was glad that he had not destroyed that train-robbery poster with the numbers of the stolen bills. He would have to telegraph Wells, Fargo and find out how that affair stood at the moment.

He tossed and turned and wriggled, as wide-awake as a scared cat. Deep snores came from somewhere not too far away. His restlessness had made a mess of the bed clothing. Then, swearing and sitting up suddenly, he swung his feet to the floor, lit a match and then the lamp. After a moment he drew on his socks and then his pants and moved as quietly as he could toward the hall and along it and down the stairs. He had had just enough liquor to stimulate him and now needed a big drink to stun him, and he did not care what kind it was.

He came to the last step of the stairs and felt his way toward the bar, bumped into it, and followed its inside edge. He was about to strike a match when he heard the distant pound of a galloping horse. The hoofbeats drew quickly and steadily nearer until they fairly hammered in the dusty, narrow street. They stopped abruptly before the hotel, and he heard hard heels strike the ground. They crossed the board sidewalk, and then there came a loud knocking on the front door. A few moments of silence, and then the knocking came again, this time much louder. Then there was a drunken curse.

Here was a fix. The bartender never could sleep through all that hullabaloo and most certainly would come down, if only to shoot the damned fool outside. Hopalong meant to pay for his liquor, but under the circumstances it might well be doubted. He was placed in the position of a cheap, liquor-stealing thief. Out of the devilments of a past life filled with them came a mischievous prompting, and it was keened by a slowly growing anger. In the space of a moment he went back into his hellraising youth of many years ago.

He slipped quietly to the door, softly turned the key, and set himself. Then he yanked open the door with one hand and drove the other in a smashing blow at the jaw of the man who was faintly silhouetted against the stars. There was a resounding crash on the flimsy board sidewalk as the door softly, quickly closed and the bolt of the lock snicked home. Then silence.

Hopalong slipped back to the bar, struck a match as he listened for sounds overhead, filled a water glass nearly full of whisky, gulped it down, tossed a silver dollar into the cash box, and then moved swiftly and silently to the stairs, the burned match gripped in his fingers. He gained his room, hastily rearranged the tumbled bed clothing, blew out the lamp, and slid under the covers. He could feel the heavy dose of liquor start working in him.

Suddenly a terrific hammering broke out downstairs. It sounded as though someone was knocking on the door with the butt of a gun and knocking with vim and abandon. He heard a grunt and then the squeak of a bed. A door slammed back against a wall and then came sounds of someone blundering down the stairs entirely surrounded by maudlin cursing.

The bartender, swearing steadily and moving on uncertain legs, reached the lower floor. There came the sound of a striking match and the ring of a lamp chimney. There was a moment's silence, and then came another crash, this one sounding as if it were inside the building, and the building shook to it. Another few moments of silence, and then came the quick, abrupt sound of a horse going into a gallop. A wild, triumphant yell faded as the hoofbeats died out in the north. Minutes seemed to pass in the now silent night, and then there came a groan, followed by a string of curses. A door slammed shut, and then the soft, unsteady padding of feet up the stairs and along the hall. Again a door slammed, and a bed creaked suddenly, but the cursing continued until it became a mutter and finally ceased.

Hopalong stretched ecstatically, turned over once more, closed his eyes, and a few moments later he was sleeping the sleep of the innocent and the virtuous.

# 8

HOPALONG enjoyed a late breakfast of ham and eggs, a stack of pancakes, and two cups of coffee. His modest needs thus being met and satisfied, he walked out into the barroom and rested an elbow on the counter. Sam was fussing with something on the back bar and was facing away from his guest.

"I'll buy you a drink an' then say *adios*," said Hopalong and then looked with simulated surprise at the slowly turning face of the bartender. "Why, what's th' matter with you? Toothache?"

"-! -! -!" replied the bartender with a black scowl.

"Liquor's good for toothache," said the customer with a grin. "A chaw of tobacco will help too. They're damn mean things, toothaches."

Sam slid a bottle and glass toward his customer and touched finger tips gently against his jaw.

"You hear anythin' last night?" he demanded, the black scowl persisting.

Hopalong chuckled.

"When I get to sleep I never hear nothin'," he said, "unless I'm sleepin' out under th' sky. Why'd you ask?"

"Oh, some damn drunk liked to knocked th' door down with a gun butt," growled the bartender and again gently touched his jaw. "I come down to see what th' hell he wanted an' to git rid of him, an' when I opened th' door

damn if he didn't hit me on th' jaw an' put me out cold! Hell of a note, gettin' a man out of his bed at that hour of th' mornin' an' then sluggin' him when he comes down to answer his own front door!"

"It don't sound reasonable," objected Hopalong indignantly. "An' it *ain't* reasonable!"

"What th' hell difference does that make?" truculently demanded the bartender.

"None, I reckon, seein' that it happened an' is done. You see who it was?" asked the sheriff.

"No, but I thought I saw whiskers."

"What th' hell difference does that make?" asked Hopalong. "You ain't had yore drink yet. That'll mebbly make you feel a mite better. I'll be sayin' so long an' go get my hoss. I got some long ridin' ahead of me."

"You wait a minute," growled the bartender, suddenly remembering something. "What about that washin' I sent off for you? She's a hard-workin' woman an' needs all she can earn." "That's right," exclaimed Hopalong, again turning toward the bar. "What's it come to?"

"What was in th' bundle?"

"One shirt an' two pairs of socks."

"Shirts are two bits. Socks, two pairs for two bits, with or without mendin'. If they need darnin' they'll be darned, an' if they don't th' price is th' same. That's mebbly because most of 'em do need it. She's a fine woman an' shore as hell she got a lousy deal when she got married."

Hopalong slid a half dollar out onto the bar and grinned. "When they come back you hold 'em for me for awhile," he said. "I ain't got no time to waste for no measly wash." He whirled and strode toward the rear door but stopped for a moment in the opening. "If I ain't back in a couple of weeks you wear 'em yourself."

"Yore sleeves are too long," grunted Sam.

"You go over an' ask th' proprietor of th' general store how to take care of that," laughed Hopalong.

"To hell with him," retorted the bartender. "An' if you come back in two weeks or two months or two years you want to cut down yore trail-herd margin or you'll shore have yore ride for nothin'." Again he felt of his jaw. "Th' low-down, cockeyed, drunken--ambusher!"

"Th' next time I come they'll mebbly give me their cattle," laughed Hopalong, "an' th' next time you hear some drunk hammerin' on yore door at that hour in th' mornin' let him hammer."

"Yeah?" sneered Sam, the red of anger flooding his face.

"Next time I'll let th'-dodge a load of buckshot an' see how spry he can move!"

"Well, we all have our troubles," said Hopalong, and this time he started walking again and kept on walking, and when he stopped he was in the stable. In a few more minutes he was riding along the side of the hotel on his way to the general store, there to lay in supplies to see him back to Twin River. The store was locked.

“Sunday!” muttered Hopalong and walked around to the rear of the building. His knocking at first availed him nothing, but he kept at it until his knuckles were sore and then he used a gun butt. The door was suddenly yanked open in his face, and he was confronted by an irate old man with a sizable chunk of firewood in both hands.

“What th’ hell you reckon yo’re doin’ on th’ Lord’s day?” snapped the proprietor, his face suffused by anger.

“Sorry to bother you,” apologized the sheriff, “but I’ve got to ride home an’ start right now. That means I’ve got to have grub for th’ trail. Wonder if you’d mind sellin’ me, say half rations, since it’s Sunday?”

“Half rations? Dammit, I might as well sell you all you need as half as much! W-e-l-l, come on in. Don’t stand there like a half-wit! Come on in!” Hopalong obeyed, and the proprietor led the way through his kitchen-bedroom and into the store. “Fine time of day to hit th’ trail! I suppose you was up hellin’ all night long.”

“You ever try to sleep in a hotel room on a Saturday night?” asked the sheriff with a grin.

“No, I ain’t never tried, an’ I ain’t never goin’ to. You don’t have to tell me what Satidy night is in this town! I’ve lived here long enough to know that. Some damn half-breed woke me up hammerin’ on th’ hotel door this mornin’, an’ there was some kinda fracas. Why can’t Sam run a decent place!” He stepped behind the counter. “Now then, what you want?”

Hopalong told him, and the order was filled and placed in an old gunny sack, in which it would be easier for carrying on a horse. As the old man straightened up from tying the end he glanced curiously at his customer.

“Well, you find any more big bills?” he demanded in a more natural tone.

“No. Didn’t need no more,” answered Hopalong. He paid for the supplies with a double eagle and slipped the change into a pocket.

“You buyin’ cattle?” asked the proprietor curiously.

“Not this year,” answered Hopalong with a smile. “Not much chance of *buyin* cattle up on this part of the country.”

“Not less’n they’re four-year-olds,” replied the proprietor, and a sly grin came to his face. “An’ then a man can’t figger on no four-dollar trail margin.”

“If they’d stop to figger what it would cost ’em to make their own drives of small bunches of cattle they’d mebbey change their minds about trail margins,” retorted Hopalong, thinking that news got around in this town. He laughed a little self-consciously, picked up the sack by its middle, and shook half of its contents into each end to make it ride better. As he was about to unlock the front door he paused for a moment.

“I might do better to sell cattle up here,” he suggested. “Young stuff, for range stockin’.”

“You might,” grunted the proprietor and reached for a broom.

“Thanks for openin’ up,” said the sheriff.

“Hell! I had to open up or be busted down!”

The long ride was uneventful, and in due time Hopalong rode into Twin River and dismounted before his little office.



The town looked exactly as he had left it, except that perhaps some of the litter and rubbish might have been shifted by the winds during his absence. He clomped into the building and found Mike reading a list of symptoms in a patent-medicine pamphlet, and the deputy was beginning to look scared. According to the pamphlet he had one foot in the grave, and the other was rapidly slipping. He hastily let both of them fall from the top of the desk to the floor, but he did not stand up. The only ailment he did not have was housemaid's knee.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he said. "You have any trouble servin' that writ on Peterson?"

"No. Why should I?" asked Hopalong, digging into his pockets. He placed the writ and the money on the desk in front of the deputy. "Take this over to th' clerk of th' court. Th' writ's satisfied. What you readin', an' where's George?"

"I'm readin' about th' medicine that cured Settin' Bull, an' George has gone to a picnic," answered Mike, shoving the pamphlet in a pocket.

"Th' medicine that cured Sittin' Bull was a .50-caliber Sharp's slug, only he didn't get it soon enough, an' it wasn't Sittin' Bull they should have cured, but Crazy Horse. An' George has gone to a picnic? A picnic?"

"Yeah. Some damn lodge he belongs to," explained Mike and picked up the writ to look at its back. "An' what did you mean about Crazy Horse?"

"He was th' brains, an' Sittin' Bull got th' credit. Which lodge?" asked the sheriff, a wide grin on his face. George belonged to every lodge there was for miles around. He was, as he proudly admitted, a natural "jiner." "Anythin' new come up while I've been away?"

"Naw," grunted Mike, playing with the double eagles on the desk, and then he looked up quickly. "Oh yes, there was a feller in here this afternoon that wanted to see you. He got mad when he found you wasn't here. Said he'd be back tomorrow, in case you got back from gallivantin' around th' country instead of 'tendin' to th' job th' taxpayers was payin' you to do. He sounded mad, looked mad, an' *was* mad. I asked him what th' hell was stickin' in his craw, but he just slammed th' door behind him an' kept on goin'. I just got it fixed half an hour ago. It was only a busted hinge."

"--! You tell him I was off servin' a writ?" demanded the sheriff, his neck slowly getting red, and color was creeping higher.

"Naw. Wasn't none of his business."

"That so? Did he say who he was or what he wanted?" demanded Hopalong, the color running up from his neck and getting into his face.

"Naw," answered the deputy, putting the money in one pocket and the writ in another.

"Where'd he go?" persisted the sheriff, glaring.

"He didn't say where he was goin', but I figger he musta gone to th' hotel. Shall I send him out to th' ranch in case he comes in after you leave?"

"An' make him all th' madder for havin' to make that ride?" snapped the sheriff. "I'll wait around an' see if he comes back. If he don't, I'll drop into th' hotel an' see if I can find him. Wait a minute! I got a better idear than that. After you take care of that writ you get busy an' find that man. You know what he looks like, an' I don't. I said *find* him. I'll be right here, waitin'."

Mike pulled his big hat down on the front of his head and started for the door. He was grumbling, and his muttered words about damned taxpayers reached the ears of his boss, which now began to turn as red as his face and neck; but before Hopalong could get the really adequate words lined up for utterance the deputy was gone and was drifting up the street toward the office of the court clerk. Hopalong swore under his breath and turned from the window, and after a few moments he began to cool off, and the color of his neck, face, and ears had begun to fade. He wondered if ever a peace officer had been burdened by such careless, irresponsible, triply damned deputies or been blessed, perhaps, with deputies of such forthright, unhesitant courage. In this life a man had to take the sour with the sweet.

# 9

HOPALONG had entirely recovered his temper when he saw the deputy striding along the street toward the office, and with him strode Frank Lorimer, the crotchety owner of the FL, hell and gone up in the northern part of the county and east of Twin River. The sheriff chuckled. Lorimer had the disposition of a dyspeptic whose stomach had been ruined by two score years of eating out of a frying pan almost exclusively. The man was all right, straight as a tight rope, but he was mighty touchy.

Lorimer stamped into the office with the deputy at his heels and glared at the sheriff, but before he could say anything, Hopa-long waved the deputy toward the door.

"If you haven't et go stuff yore face, Mike. You needn't come back till mornin'. Vamoose. Get out, an' pronto."

Mike, despite a reluctance engendered by a burning curiosity, obeyed with alacrity. He did not like the office and any time he could get away from it was something to be treasured. Neither did he like to ride very much. He was the Twin River pool champion and very much preferred a cue to a saddle. Now he went out the back door and headed for the small corral, whistling cheerfully.

"All right, Frank," prompted the sheriff. "What you all riled up about?"

"It's a hell of a note when a public official feels like takin' a week off whenever th' idear hits him, when he's paid to stay on th' job!"

“Meanin’ me, of course?” asked the sheriff with a broad smile.

“You know damn well that I mean you! A taxpayer comes in here an’ wants yore help, an’ where th’ hell are you? Off somewhere huntin’ or fishin’!”

“Well, I got to admit that I was off somewhere, an’ for a time it looked like I might have to do a little huntin’ an’ even some fishin’, but not th’ kind yo’re thinkin’ about. I was off servin’ a writ—a damn piece of paper, signed by th’ judge. It took me a week to ride th’ round trip. I could have done it in a little less if I had to, but it just happened that I had reason to do a little lookin’ around, an’ th’ lookin’ was sheriff’s business. How’d you like to put in a week on th’ trails, servin’ a measly piece of paper on a man who you knowed was a friend?”

“I wouldn’t like it an’ I wouldn’t do it!” snorted the ranchman. He took off his big hat, tossed it onto a table, and then dropped himself onto a chair. “I reckon mebbby you got some more lookin’ around to do. Us fellers up my way have been losin’ cattle! By Godfrey, there ain’t no question about it! We’re losin’ cattle an’ have been for quite some time. That’s what I come in to see you about.”

“How do you know? What makes you think so?” asked the sheriff.

“How do we know?” The ranchman’s voice was almost a shout. “We just got through roundin’ up; *that’s* how we know! Up in our part of th’ country we pitch in an’ join hands on our roundups, which saves us from hirin’ much outside help. Nat’rally we swap news an’ information. We’ve *all* lost cattle!”

"Was there any sign of it last spring?" asked the sheriff slowly and after a moment's thought.

"No, not that any of us knowed about then. Why?"

"Never mind th' 'why'. If you know about it now you'd have knowed about it then, wouldn't you?" asked the sheriff.

"Reckon we had some suspicions," retorted the ranchman, "but we didn't have nothin' plain enough to come to you about it."

"That don't hardly square up with th' way you been shootin' off yore mouth about gallivantin' public officials!" retorted the sheriff. "Well, let's bury th' hatchet for awhile. You got any idear what kind of cattle you've lost?"

"What difference does that make?" demanded Lorimer sharply.

"Mebby a whole lot more than you can guess. Have you?"

"Yes, an' you needn't climb up on no high boss! What we figger we lost was four-year-olds that we was countin' on sellin' this year."

"Would yore tally sheets tell you that?" asked the sheriff.

"Mebby not about th' age," admitted Lorimer, who hated keeping tally sheets. He did not have so many cattle that he could not keep track of them in his head. He hitched forward on the chair. "We ain't strong on tally sheets but we know how many we got. We ain't none of us got such big herds as you have, which means that we can remember more individual animals. You ride over th' Double Y range an' you'll see a few animals that you know you've seen before. When we ride over ourn we see five, ten times that many

that we've seen before, an' remember. Then we quit seein' a lot of 'em. I figger I've lost near sixty head. There's six of us up in that part of th' county, an' we've begun to figger that we've lost, between us, more'n three hundred head. This ain't no guesswork; it's fact. Th' boys sent me down here to find out what yo're goin' to do about it. An' now I'm waitin' to hear yore answer."

"Frank, we've knowed each other many years, an' I don't like th' way yo're talkin' to me," replied the sheriff. "You suspected last spring that you were losin' cattle an' you wait till right now to tell me about it. If I hadn't took an oath when I was sworn in to this job—an' you'll notice that I said job an' not office—I'd tell you to go plumb to hell an' find yore own cattle but I can't."

Hopalong sighed and stared out of the window for a moment. Then he squared his shoulders and turned around.

"I'll do what I can. That means I'll do my damndest. You can take that word back with you, because it's gospel. Now, check me if I'm wrong. There's Larry French, of th' LF; Charley Norris, of th' CN; Mark Nelson, of th' MN. There ought to be one more—yeah, Tom Colby, of th' TC. Which one of you boys lay farthest to th' east?"

"Tom Colby," answered the ranchman. "His nearest neighbor on th' east is Tom Jones, of th' TSJ. Jones rode in one day while we was cleanin' up th' east part of th' range, which was a hell of a long ride for him to make, an' he figgered that he, too, was losin' cattle. Now don't go on th' prod, Hoppy. We shore have knowed each other for a mighty long time. I know th' kinda man you are. I've alius knowed it. I just kinda blew up. I had no business to get sore with *you!*"

“Tom Jones, huh?” mused Hopalong. “That makes it purty wide—an’ I wouldn’t be surprised if it was even wider than that. How far are you from Hancock, a towns over east of here?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Neither do I. I was just wonderin’,” answered the sheriff. “Any of you boys sell any cattle, yearlin’s an’ two-year-olds, mostly cows?”

“We sold some but we ain’t countin’ them as missin’,” answered the ranchman.

“Who bought ’em, an’ when?”

“Some fellers we never saw before. Why?”

“When?” persisted the sheriff.

“Last fall, early. What you drivin’ at?”

“How many were they of them buyers?” asked the sheriff.

“Two. Why?”

“When did you say you sold cattle to those buyers?”

“Last fall. Ah, it wasn’t early, neither. It was late in th’ fall,” said Lorimer. “Ain’t seen ’em since.”

“How did you vent th’ brands?”

“We lined ’em. Why?”

“Were you offered paper money? Big bills? Five-hundred-dollar bills?”



"Hell, no. We didn't sell enough head to run to such a figger. They bought a few from all of us. What you drivin' at?"

"Nothin', mebbby," answered Hopalong. "Then you never visited Hancock. You know anybody from there or north of there?"

"No, but I've heard that Tom Jones comes from up there somewhere."

"What kind of money did you fellers get for th' cattle those two buyers bought from you?" asked the sheriff.

"Hard money. Double eagles, an' they looked brand-new. But what's all of this got to do with our stolen cattle?"

"That's what I'm figgerin' to find out," answered the sheriff. "Run back in yore mind. Did you see th' sack that hard money was in? Did them buyers wear whiskers?"

"No. None of 'em was whiskered. An' it was a reg'lar money sack. But what does this all amount to?" Lorimer snorted.

"An' suppose they did wear whiskers? Plenty of men up here wear whiskers. I do, myself, durin' th' winter. Why you askin' so many damn-fool questions?"

"I wish I knowed. Was there any printin' on the money sack?" "I didn't see none. Mebbby I was too busy lookin' at th' money."

"Was that sack right side out or inside out?" persisted the sheriff.

"Damn if I know. What you asking so many fool questions for?" demanded the ranchman.

"Mebby to find out how much a fool knows an' remembers!" snapped the sheriff. "I got a lot of funny things in th' back of

my mind an' I'm tryin' to make a pattern out of 'em. Now let me see if you ever saw this man before," continued the sheriff, and he gave a slow, careful description of the man who had been seen on the train, repeating almost word for word the description given on the wanted poster.

"No. They didn't neither of 'em have any scar on his face," answered the ranchman. "Th' rest of th' description would fit three, four men I know. What you got on yore mind?"

"Nothin' more than some hair, I reckon. Do you use a straight iron or a stamper?"

"Straight," answered Lorimer.

"An old mosshead like you would use a straight iron! I hope th' state will outlaw straight irons. I reckon yore friends use th' same kind?"

"Yeah. I been kinda figgerin' on havin' some stampers made for me."

"You all better change over an' change damn quick," said the sheriff. "It's impossible to make exactly th' same brand each time if you draw it with a straight iron. Th' old straight iron is th' cattle thief's hope an' Bible. An' when you change get a stamper with small letters. It's harder for a thief to make little letters with a long, big an' heavy straight iron than it is to make big letters. You asked me what I have on my mind. Not very much. Just a little place where th' hair's gettin' thin, but whether you believe it or not there's some damn funny idears playin' tag under my hair, only they don't know who's it."

The sheriff sat back and relaxed a little. Then he pushed forward suddenly against the edge of the desk. He had

looked out of the window; he had paced the floor and then finally had dropped onto the old chair at his desk.

"Here," he said, picking up an envelope which had been through the mail. It was his habit to slice all such and use them for scratch paper. "Here's a pencil too. You know how th' brands are made up yore way. Draw me a picture of each of 'em. Exact pictures. That'll save me makin' searches in th' county brand book. An' if you know how Tom Jones draws his TSJ on his critters you might draw that too."

Lorimer, from time to time wetting the pencil point, was laboriously drawing capital letters. Finally he looked up, remembered the sheriff's last request, and shook his head.

"I never saw Tom Jones' brand on any critter," he said. "It wasn't even on his hoss." He pushed the envelope toward the sheriff and looked much interested.

"Huh. All straight letterin'. No runnin' together. An' you don't remember if that money sack was turned inside out?" "I don't seem to," admitted Lorimer, his facial expression still a composite of curiosity and surprise.

"You remember any letterin' on it? Any printin'?" asked Hopalong, and then suddenly wished that he had not asked that question. No men who were not utter fools would keep marked, stolen money sacks in their possession longer than necessary. Courts had held that such marks, under certain conditions, were sufficient identification of stolen money.

"No, I didn't see any such marks," slowly answered Lorimer. "I reckon I would have seen 'em if there'd been any. They plumped that sack right plumb onto my table an' counted out my pay."

"You said you vented th' brands by linin' 'em?"

“Yes siree, lined ‘em right through th’ middle.”

The sheriff grew silent, thinking of many things. He had a telegram to compose and send off to Wells, Fargo. He had to be in town when the bank opened in the morning to draw out five hundred dollars in gold. If he went out to the ranch to spend the night it would only be a long and useless ride, and he nearly had had his fill of riding, considering that he would be riding again the next day and the next after that. Of course he could do with some fresh clothes—hah! he had a small bundle of them waiting for him at the hotel in Hancock, and there was a washwoman over there to take care of his needs. If Mesquite were at the ranch he would make the ride, because he could find good use for Mesquite, but the kid was off visiting Tex Ewalt and might not be back for a week or more.

“Frank,” he said, now smiling at the man across the desk from him, “you figger to start home tonight?”

“Hell, no!” answered the ranchman. “It’s too late in th’ day for that. There ain’t no sense in startin’ today.”

“I’m figgerin’ th’ same way, so far as I am concerned, an’ I live a lot closer to town than you do,” replied the sheriff, and a slow grin slipped across his face. “I’ll be stayin’ at th’ same place you are. I want to start ridin’ as early as I can in th’ mornin’. Besides, that’ll give me a chance to play a little draw poker with my friends. You like to play poker, Frank?”

“Yo’re damn tootin’ I do,” smilingly admitted the ranchman. “That is, I’d like to play some draw if th’ stakes ain’t too high.” “Draw is what is in my mind,” replied Hopalong, and the grin grew. “An’ th’ stakes are figgered in four-bit pieces: ten whites or five colored chips. Either of ‘em figger to just four bits. It’s a five-an’-ten-cent game, an’ there’s a lot of fun

in it. If I can get th' boys to come to th' hotel after supper I'll let you know."

"Thought you played a damn big game," said Lorimer in surprise.

"I do when I want to," answered the sheriff, "but with this town crowd I can have more fun at five an' ten. As long as a man gambles for stakes he can well afford to lose—oh well, you know that as well as I do. Some of these boys can't afford to lose heavy."

"Well, all right," replied Lorimer, gently scratching his head; "but do you figger you know anythin' about this damn rustlin'?"

"I figger I know quite a lot more about it than you do right now," answered the sheriff with a smile, "an' if I have any luck a-tall I'll know a whole lot more about it before I get through. I got a couple of idears in my head right now that might make you laugh if you knowed 'em. Anyhow, I'm startin' tomorrow an' I'm stayin' with it." He smiled again, gently and reprovably. "That means that I'll be away from th' office some more. You see, I'm mebbby one of th' few public officials that try right hard to do th' job he's paid to do."

Lorimer flushed and slowly shook his head.

"Hell, knowin' you like I do, I didn't have no call to say what I did. I was just mad all over an' lookin' for somebody to hop onto. I didn't mean nothin' personal, far's you are concerned, but that damn' smart-aleck deputy of yourn shore stirred up my dandruff."

"He not only stirs up mine but he keeps it stirred up," replied the sheriff, "but he has his good points. I figgered mebbby

that you really didn't mean all you said an' now I'm glad to know that I was right." He smiled again. "Frank, don't be in too much of a sweat to start home tomorrow. It may just happen that I'll be wantin' to go along with you. You told me that this Tom Jones, of th' TSJ, visited you boys an' let you all know that he, too, had been losin' cattle."

"Yes, I told you that, an' that was what he told us," replied the ranchman curiously. "You figger he's into it?"

"You say he had to make a damn long ride to get over to yore place," said the sheriff.

"Yeah, that's right."

"I don't know if he's in it or not," replied the sheriff after a moment's hesitation. "How can he be? Still, he might have been lookin' you over an' learnin' some trails. Well, it's too early to start figgerin' from that angle," he continued. "A thing like this ain't no guessin' game, except, mebby, at th' beginnin'. A man's got to make shore. Just th' same, I'm not overlookin' him. Where about is this Tom Jones located?"

"Oh, seventy, eighty miles east of us, away over east of Mud Creek," answered Lorimer. "Th' country is mighty rough an' barren around Mud Creek an' gets worse as you go on east. All cut to hell an' gone with little canyons, arroyos, an' draws. I looked it over when I first came out here years ago. A crew would have a tough time drivin' a herd anywhere through it. I ain't shore it can be done, though of course there's a hull lot of it that I never saw. There ain't no grass to amount to nothin' an' no water that ain't so full of alkali that cattle won't drink it. It's hell's own country, an' a lot better than fences. We used to comb it along th' west part but we don't even look it over on our roundups no more. Never did find any cattle on it. There ain't just nothin' over that way to

tempt a cow. Seein' as how this Jones reckons he's lost some of his cattle, too, makes us kinda figger that they are bein' drove north or west, but it can't hardly be west, seein' how many small ranches they'd have to skirt. That makes it look like it's north." He sighed and then grinned. "That was a mighty long speech for me, Hoppy."

"Mebby, but it's a purty good picture," replied the sheriff. "Looks like you boys have been thinkin' it out an' talkin' it over." He opened the desk drawer, pawed around in it for a moment, and then, glancing at a folded paper he had picked up, spread it out on the desk and became busy for a few moments copying the ten large numbers which were on the Abe Lincoln stolen yellow backs. This done, he tossed the poster back into the drawer, put the copied list into a pocket, and reached for a sheet of letter paper.

"Just a minute, Frank," he said, and began to write a telegram addressed to Wells, Fargo and Company at their main office. He was curious to learn the present status of that train-robbery affair. After a few moments he stood up.

"All right, Frank, let's go eat," he said and then caught sight of George crossing the street near the livery stable. Evidently the picnic was over. The sheriff stuck his head out of the door and called sharply. George stopped and turned and then reluctantly headed for the office.

"You goin' to any more picnics today?" asked the sheriff with a trace of acid in his voice.

"Naw," answered George, surprised. "It's too late in th' day for a picnic."

"Glad to hear it. Thought mebbly there might be some newfangled picnic on hand. You figger you've got time to do a little work before we call it a day?"

“Yeah, reckon so,” answered George with no enthusiasm. “Hope it’s in town, seein’ it’s so near suppertime.”

“It’s in town,” grunted the sheriff. “First, send this telegram, prepaid. Second, I want you to cash a check for me. I want th’ whole five hundred in gold. Th’ bank’s closed, but you know where th’ boss lives. If he ain’t got it at home he’ll have to go to th’ bank, because this is sheriff’s business, an’ I got to have th’ money today. I’ll not be here when th’ bank opens tomorrow. Now you stand tied for a minute while I write out th’ check.”

Hopalong went back to the desk, and a few moments later George took the check and the telegram and started for the door.

“Bring th’ money up to me at th’ hotel right away,” ordered the sheriff, “an’ then come back after supper. Don’t forget th’ telegram needs an answer. You hang around th’ station an’ wait for it. Tell Hank that it’s important an’ ask him if he’ll stay by his sounder for a reasonable length of time. If I know him like I think I do he’ll do that for me.”

“All right,” replied the deputy, and went on his way.

“That telegram ain’t got nothin’ to do with our stolen cattle, has it?” asked Lorimer as he and the sheriff slowly walked toward the hotel a block away.

“I don’t know,” thoughtfully answered Hopalong. “Mebby, an’ mebbly not. Seems like there’s a couple of things mixed up together. I’m right suspicious an’ I got a damn uneasy feelin’.” He abruptly changed the subject. “How you boys makin’ out up in yore part of th’ county, barrin’ stolen cattle?”



"We're doin' fair, I reckon, gettin' our beans an' bacon, anyhow," answered Lorimer. "We're figgerin' on buyin' more graded Durham bulls next year. You reckon beef prices are goin' up?"

"Durhams are all right, but as to beef prices, that's somethin' I'd rather not guess at," answered Hopalong. "But there's this about it: graded bulls are a good buy. They're a good buy whether next year's prices are high or low because they're a long-haul proposition. They'll increase th' weight of yore critters year after year. That means you'll get top prices. I'd rather buy a few graded bulls than twenty times their number in range stuff." He thought for a moment. "You owe th' bank any money? Anybody hold yore note?"

"No," answered Lorimer, looking curiously at his companion. "Why did you ask that?"

"Can you buy them graded bulls without goin' into debt?"  
"Yeah. Why?"

"That's good. For th' next year play close to yore vest an' don't buy cattle on borrowed money. After next year you may be able to buy a slew of cattle for a whole lot less than you'll have to pay for 'em from now to then."

Supper over, Hopalong and the ranchman stepped out onto the porch and dropped into comfortable armchairs, and there it was that George found them. The deputy handed over the five hundred dollars in gold and growled about the argument put up by the banker before that person consented to go to the bank and cash the check. Hank was staying beside his sounder in the railroad office waiting for a reply to the sheriff's telegram and would remain there for an hour or more. Then George listened to what his boss had to tell him about the suspected cattle stealing and showed

instant, keen interest. This was different from hanging around the office, doing nothing. When real action was in sight both the deputies were on their toes and ready to go, which was the one reason why Hopalong forgave them their many minor sins. Out on the range they were both good men, and their courage and loyalty were unquestioned.

“Better let Mike or me look around up north,” George suggested, hitching up his gun belt. He no longer was a joiner of lodges or a picnicker; he was a cold-eyed officer of the law. “It’s been so long that either of us have had anythin’ worth while to do that we’d both like to take a damn good look up there.”

Hopalong thought for a moment and then shook his head.

“I figger you’d be wastin’ yore time,” he replied. “I’ve got an idear that I’m goin’ to try out. One that I had before I ever knew what it was. A man’s mind is a funny thing. When I went over to serve that writ on Ben Peterson I got right suspicious, but I couldn’t put a name to anythin’ or get hold of anythin’. Now I reckon I’ve got a couple of names to call it, an’ one of ’em may surprise you later on.” Again he shook his head.

“No, George. You an’ Mike stay right here, so I’ll know where to find you if I need you in a hurry. An’ by th’ way, when I’m out of town my name’s Jones—Fred Jones. An’ when I’m over in Hancock I’m stayin’ at th’ hotel. There is only one. My business is buyin’ cattle for th’ trail.” He chuckled contentedly. “I ain’t been able to buy any yet because I’m demandin’ a four-dollar-a-head trail margin.”

Lorimer laughed and threw away his cigar.

“I reckon yore trail herds won’t be very big,” he said, and then glanced down the street, where four men were slowly

walking toward the hotel. "Here come th' victims," he announced and unconsciously rubbed his hands. He had not sat in a poker game for a long while and expected to have a very enjoyable evening. George nodded to his two companions and slowly, lazily went down the steps. As he swung into the saddle he looked at his boss.

"I'll be hanging around th' station as long as Hank stays there," he said. "If th' answer comes in I'll bring it right up to you."

"Thanks, George," replied Hopalong. "I shore hope it comes before I leave in th' mornin'."

# 10

THE EVENING had passed pleasantly enough, and Hopalong had won a dollar. The first light of dawn crept around the edges of the window shades and made him stir restlessly. After a few moments he moved again and then opened his eyes. It was another day, and the beginning of more hard riding than he had done for a long time, most of it cross country and over rough country. He had thought it all over after the game of the night before: hard riding, camping in the open, and perhaps both himself and his horse might suffer from thirst; but that was what a man might expect when he had no better sense than to become a sheriff. But sheriffs were needed, and someone had to do the work.

He stretched and yawned and stretched again. After a few moments of delightful relaxation he threw back the blanket and pivoted as he sat up, his feet landing on the floor. He still was sleepy, but the cool water in the washbowl quickly banished that. In the next room he heard a stirring: that would be Lorimer, getting dressed and ready for breakfast.

Ho, hum! There was no mistake about it: a man was a damned fool ever to become a sheriff. He began to get into his clothes, and not long thereafter he reached for one of the gun belts hanging from the back of a chair. The loops were full, the projecting lead carefully wiped clean of grease to keep them from accumulating sand and dust, which in time would ruin the barrels of the guns. As it was he had new barrels put in about every second year. The most important part of a barrel was near the muzzle, and that was where most of the sand and grit collected. He clamped an elbow against the heavy holster, holding it tightly against his hip, and then swung the belt around his waist, catching the free end and making it fast in the buckle. The second belt, also, was full. In a moment it, too, was in place, resting against the hipbone, the other side sagging properly. If heavy gun belts were not properly hung their weight seemed to grow and to drag on a man. He bent down and tied the holddown thongs around each leg.

An idea out of nowhere popped into his head: he should have given more thought and time and practice to the cross-arm draw but still he believed it was not so good with two guns. Of course the best, shortest, and quickest of all was the belly draw, but to get the most speed and to do it properly required a short-barreled gun, and a short barrel meant too short a sight base for accurate shooting at the longer ranges which necessity from time to time forced him to shoot over. Also the belly draw meant an uncomfortably tight belt. A louder noise came from the next room. It sounded like Lorimer had dropped his gun. Hopalong grinned and called out.

“Hey, Frank! You ready to eat?”

“Yeah. You reckon breakfast will be ready so early?”

"Mebbe not, but we won't have to wait very long," answered the sheriff.

"What they feed you here?" asked Lorimer.

"Coffee, ham or bacon, fried potatoes, an' mebbby more."

"No aigs?" asked Lorimer. He sounded disappointed.

"Mebby. Don't know. Hope so if they're fresh. You about ready?"

"I will be when I catch this damn belt," answered Lorimer. "I've missed it three times hand runnin'."

They met in the hall and went down the stairs together. The desk clerk, still half asleep, had just come on duty. He nodded perfunctorily and grunted something.

"What?" asked Lorimer, frowning.

"You'll have to wait a little for breakfast," said the clerk.

"That damn cook was out all night, an' I ain't shore he's even nearly sober. Every three, four weeks he gets tight as a nut on an axle."

"I want a drink then," said Lorimer. "What'll you have, Cassidy?"

"I'll take a cigar an' smoke it later," answered Hopalong, quietly studying his companion's face. A man who had to have a drink of hard liquor before breakfast . . .

"Tell you somethin', John," said Hopalong, turning to the clerk. "If th' cook is too drunk to cook I ain't an' I'd rather cook than do much waitin'."

"Hold yore hoss," growled the clerk, heading for the door to the dining room. In a few moments he reappeared, a reassuring expression on his hard face. "He's all ready to go. Th' coffee's makin' now. Go on in an' give yore orders."

On this morning there were eggs. They had come in on the mail train the day before from Kansas City. It was possible for them to be only three days old, but they usually were older. Frank Lorimer smiled with anticipation. Eggs! He could have them only when he came to town. He planted his elbows on the table and, looking across at his companion, broke into a chuckle.

"You know how long it's been since I've had any aigs?" he asked.

"No," laughed the sheriff, "but however long it's been, it's yore fault. You ever hear of folks keepin' chickens?"

"Yeah, I have," retorted Lorimer with a grin. "*You* got any on th' Double Y?" he challenged.

"Shore. Got plenty. An' we keep th' roosters by themselves. Our aigs ain't from three days to three weeks old neither. You can cook lots more different kind of grub if you've got aigs in th' kitchen."

Breakfast over, they paid their scores and walked around to the stable, Hopalong fretting about the answer to his telegram. As they were saddling up George rode into sight around the corner of the hotel, an envelope in his hand. He waved it and grinned.

Hopalong ripped it open, spread out the sheet of paper, and read it quickly, learning that eight of the stolen bills had been located in a bank in Helena. They had come in from banks in two cattle towns and had been traced back to

cattlemen who had accepted them in payment for cattle. When last seen the herd was made up of about two hundred head and was being driven south. Party made up of four men wearing full beards. Descriptions of three were vague and clashed, but the fourth was left-handed, and his black beard was lightly streaked with gray. His nose was thin with high bridge. Brown eyes, one hundred eighty pounds, five feet eleven. This man better remembered because he did all the dickering. Wells, Fargo would be glad to send expert operatives if needed.

Hopalong read it again and then gave it back to the deputy and told him to put it in the drawer of the desk along with the wanted poster. Soon he and Lorimer were riding out of town together, and the latter again glanced at the big bedroll fastened behind the cantle of his companion's saddle and then to the big canteen.

"It shore looks like yo're aimin' to do some ridin'," he said with a grin.

"I shore am, an' I'm startin' from th' TC," replied the sheriff.

"Tom will be glad to see you whether yo're a sheriff or not," said Lorimer. "We all of us get lonesome at times. Which way you headin' from there?"

Hopalong thought quickly. Lorimer was all right, but the fewer there were who knew anything about his journey, the better he would like it. News has a way of getting around.

"I don't know yet," he answered. "That's somethin' I'll have to figger out later. If I find anythin' it'll lead me to somethin' else, an' so on."

And so they loped along, side by side. They had left town some hours before the morning train had come in, and the

sheriff missed by those few hours a belated letter which came in on that train. It was a letter from Johnny Nelson and it stated that the writer and his wife were leaving their SV ranch for a visit to the Double Y. For some reason this letter had been delayed and did not reach Twin River until this morning, just one day ahead of the arrival of Johnny and Margaret. At last the two riders came to a fork in the trail, shook hands, said good-by, and parted, Lorimer following the left-hand fork, the sheriff, the right.

The TC ranch house was a log building of one room. Had it been located more to the east and south it might have been a sod hut, but there was no sod in this country, and even the logs had been hard to obtain. Its clay-daubed chimney barely cleared the ridgepole, and the nearing rider idly thought that on damp, windy days its stove would smoke and not draw well. It was on the southern slope of a high ridge, and about a score of yards below it ran a small creek of clear water over a gravel bottom. Behind it was a small, rough pole corral, and stacked against its northern and western walls were neatly piled tiers of firewood. Its door and one window were in the south wall, on the side away from the prevailing winter winds. A thin feather of smoke climbed from the chimney and gave notice that its owner was at home and that mealtime was at hand.

Hopalong rode slowly down the facing slope, crossed the creek, and stopped before the half-open door, which now swung fully open as a tall, lean man in a blue shirt, blue overalls, and worn cowhide boots stepped into the opening. He smiled widely as he recognized his visitor.

“Howdy, Sheriff. Light down. Yo’re just in time for a snack.”

“Howdy, Tom. I usually time it that way,” chuckled the sheriff, removing the big bedroll and placing it against the



side of the house. He stripped off the saddle and bridle, placed them with the bedroll, and then, briskly rubbing the horse's wet back with the saddle blanket, threw the blanket over the short clothesline at the corner of the building and walked toward the door. Here he paused for a moment to watch the horse stop rolling and scramble to its feet. It drank at the creek and then headed straight for a patch of bunch grass. There was plenty of grass in sight.

"Fine hoss," said the ranchman, his eyes lighting.

"Never rode a better," replied Hopalong and followed his host into the house. The ranchman took a pan of hot biscuits out of the oven and went briskly to work with frying pan and coffeepot. Hopalong saw that the water bucket was nearly empty, picked it up, and made a trip to the creek.

The two men ate a hearty meal and then sat back and talked about the matter most prominent in their minds, and then Hopalong went on his way again. He saw a grazing cow and rode close enough to read the brand. It was TC, and the letters were so scrawled that they must have been made with a straight iron. No blacksmith would have turned out a stamper like that. Lorimer was right, and here was another man who put his faith in straight irons, the rustler's friend. He would have to preach some sermons against their use when he came this way again. He saw other cows and in each case took the trouble to look at the brands. They were all TC, and a straight iron had made them. There were no two alike, not even in size.

As the miles slipped behind him the country became steadily worse. Steep-sided, rain-scoured gullies were more numerous and grew deeper where the hurrying waters of heavy rains had found the earth friable. Here and there dirty

white patches of ground revealed the presence of alkali and grew larger and more numerous as time passed.

He pushed on at a steady lope, occasionally letting his horse have a breather and always walking it up the longer slopes, and late in the afternoon came to a rivulet flowing along the middle of a wide creek bed whose perpendicular walls rose thirty to forty feet above it. Casting about, he found and rode down a tributary gully and down this to the creek. The horse nuzzled the water, hesitated, and then drank.

Hopalong frowned. If this water had a trace of alkali, what about the water he would have to depend on during the next few days? Huh, nothing much to worry about, yet. He rode down the creek, found a gully cutting the east bank, and followed it up to the plain above. Coming upon a fair patch of bunch grass, he dismounted and made camp for the night.

# 11

SUNRISE found him awake, and less than an hour later he was again in the saddle, pushing steadily northeastward, and he pushed on all day. When evening came he knew that he was beyond the grazing limits of Tom Colby's herds. He had not seen a cow all day. This had a definite meaning to him: any dried cow chips he now found would have been dropped by driven, and not by loose, animals. The northward course of his riding had been deliberate: he wanted to get so far north that he would be above the territory which might have been crossed by stolen animals. In the morning he would turn and strike south in the attempt to find traces of such cattle. There would be no tracks, of course, under ordinary circumstances, after all the time which had passed, but there might be telltale dried chips and even the traces of campfires.

As he rode he turned things over in his mind, and one thought was about the stolen money—thirty thousand dollars. Over in Hancock he had been told that the Jones brothers had by now become fairly large ranchers. They had tried to buy yearlings and two-year-olds. At the present range prices the cost of such animals would average about seventeen dollars a head. This figure was close enough anyhow. At this price, thirty thousand dollars would buy between seventeen and eighteen hundred head. If they also bought three-year-olds the average would grow to about nineteen dollars a head, or something over fifteen hundred head. There were five Jones brothers in the cattle business. Huh. That would give each of them three hundred or three hundred and fifty head, which would make them fall far short of being anywhere near big cattlemen. He watered his horse late in the afternoon and made a dry camp that night.

Just after noon of the following day he saw a chip and pulled up to scrutinize the country to the east, where the ridges and gullies continued without letup and where a herd would have to follow certain courses and would not be free to travel wherever it pleased. He saw such a course now, a sharp break in the steep-sided ridge a mile or more from him, and it appeared to be the only break in that sheer, towering rock wall. He kneed his horse and rode slowly toward it, searching the ground on all sides of him as he rode. A small, moving herd of cattle would leave few chips, and those far apart, but a bed ground would be different.

It was not long before he reached the gap and had a better view of the ridge itself. Its walls were so steep as to be a bar to cattle, but the gap cut through it cleanly, its walls also nearly perpendicular. Leaving the gap, he soon came to a small creek flowing turgidly through a mire of blackish-yellow mud, and beyond the edge of the mire were several dried chips. He circled the mire, crossed above it, and came

upon a few charred sticks, arranged spokewise. Cattle had been here, and here their drivers had camped.

Two days later he saw the first cow. It was grazing ahead of him and to his right. Bunch grass was more plentiful, and when his horse unhesitatingly drank from the next small creek he knew that he was back upon catde range. Pushing forward, he read the cow's brand. It was TSJ and had been made with a straight iron. In order to make certain that the brand had not been altered it would be necessary to kill and skin of! that part of the hide, and as yet he lacked sufficient grounds for such a highhanded proceeding.

The brands which Lorimer had written down for him ran through his mind again: FL, LF, CN, NJ, MN, TC. If cattle bearing these brands had been stolen and the brands changed the same difficulty would exist in relation to all of them. TSJ. TSJ? None of the brands in Lorimer's part of the country would fit into that. He tried it again and the result was the same. Well, there was no reason to search out the TSJ ranch house, but he had discovered that driven cattle had crossed this arid, rough country between the ranges around Hancock and the ranges of Lorimer and his friends. Then he swore suddenly; that might mean nothing at all. Lorimer and his friends had sold cattle to two strangers, and it might be that they had left the signs which he had found. He still had plenty of riding to do, more cows to find, more brands to read and now he swore again: if he had taken the time and trouble to consult the county brand book and make copies of the remaining Jones brothers' marks the riding might have been spared him.

He suddenly came upon horse tracks, and they looked to be fresh. He did not know in just which direction to ride to get to Hancock without too much wandering and he followed the tracks, since they led in the general direction of his riding.

Two hours went by, and then he saw a log house a mile or more ahead and pushed on at a steady lope.

The man who suddenly appeared in the door to watch him as he rode down the slope was bewhiskered; and he, like too many more, answered fairly close to- the description on the wanted poster, except that he wore whiskers. But as Hopalong pulled up before the door and nodded he saw that the man's nose lacked a high, thin bridge.

"I reckon you can say I'm temporary lost," he admitted with a grin. "I'm ridin' for a town named Hancock but I got turned around a little. Can you tell me th' straightest way to get there?"

The rancher forced a smile and tried to mask any sign of suspicion, but his eyes betrayed him.

"You look like an old-timer to me, an' old-timers don't get lost," he replied with a chuckle.

"Most any stranger could get turned around in this damn country," growled the sheriff. "Worst mess I've been in for a long time."

The ranchman laughed and nodded.

"Reckon they could," he admitted, his gaze flicking from the brand on the rider's horse to the rider's face. "That's a fine hoss you got there."

"I've never seen a better," replied Hopalong with a smile.

"How come yo're ridin' for Hancock?" asked the ranchman. "It ain't hardly more'n a flyspeck."

"Mebby so, but it's right plumb in th' middle of cow country that's strange to me," answered Hopalong. "My business is buyin' an' drivin' cattle, an' this is new range to me. You got any you want to sell?"

"Got a few head of three-year-olds," answered the ranchman with sudden interest. "Fine critters too."

Hopalong shook his head regretfully.

"I got all my beef contracts filled. What I'm interested in right now is range stockin'. Young cows."

The ranchman seemed to be disappointed, and he shook his head.

"It's range stockin' an' young cows that *I'm* interested in too," he said. "What you payin'?"

"I'm figgerin' on a four-dollar-a-head trail margin," answered the sheriff.

"*Four* dollars!" exclaimed the ranchman, his eyebrows going up. "Where th' hell you aimin' to drive 'em? Chiny?" Whereupon the old and futile argument came up again and got nowhere.

"Are there any other ranchers in this part of th' country between here an' Hancock?" asked Hopalong.

"Not between here an' Hancock, but there's five, six more on th' range around th' town," answered the ranchman, and then he grinned. "But I reckon you can save yoreself some hard ridin'. They'll not have anythin' to sell you at that trail margin an' besides, they ain't sellin' cows."

"All right," grunted Hopalong, sitting up straighter in the saddle. He had not missed the quick turn of the rancher's head nor the direction in which he had glanced when asked if there were other ranches between there and Hancock. "If you'll tell me how to get to Hancock th' shortest way I'll be ridin' on." The ranchman flung a hand at the faint trail leading southward.

"Follow that an' you'll get there," he said. "It's near thirty miles. This trail cuts into another where it forks. Take th' left-hand fork. After that it crosses a north-an'-south trail. Pay no attention to that but keep right on goin' east, an' a couple of miles farther on you'll strike another north-an'-south trail. Follow this one south, an' it'll turn into Hancock's main street." Again he looked at the stranger's horse. "I see yore hoss is wearin' a diamond brand," he said. "He's a fine hoss." Hopalong thought quickly. This man was not range-bred. He should know the difference between a diamond and a long diamond, but it was evident that he did not.

"Yes," replied the sheriff. "All Diamond hosses are fine bred. Well, if I see you in town I'll buy you a drink. Thanks, stranger. I'll be ridin' on my way."

"So long," replied the ranchman and remained leaning in the doorway until a rise hid the horseman from sight. "No sir, I ain't never seen a purtier hoss. Diamond brand, huh?" he muttered, thinking of certain other brands. He grunted and stepped back into the house.

After he had followed the trail for a few miles Hopalong left it and hid his horse in a gully. He returned to a point near the trail and hid himself behind a clump of grass and brush from where he could see the trail. After nearly an hour's watch he decided that the rancher had not trailed him, and went back to his horse to continue his ride eastward. Bunch grass was

plentiful, and trickles of water in the creek beds were sweet. The number of cattle in sight slowly increased, all branded TSJ, and they were in good condition.

Mile followed mile, and then, late in the day, he saw the first animal bearing a different brand. It was EEJ. Again brands paraded through his mind, and this time he gravely considered two more of them: the FL of Frank Lorimer and the LF of Larry French. In each instance the addition of a single letter and a few straight lines could turn either of these into the EEJ. If they had been altered into this mark new lines would have to join the old, and the new brand would certainly show newer scar tissue hooked on to the old, but not on the hair side of the skin. Well, later on he hoped he might have sufficient reasons to kill and skin a few of such animals.

Seeing that he had enough food left to take care of him for another day or even perhaps the next, there was no reason why he could not delay his return to Hancock. He pushed on, made his night camp on a clear rill of sweet water, and at sunrise or shortly after was on his way again. About noon he caught sight of another brand, the GMJ. Again brands lined up and marched through his mind, and the CN of Charley Norris checked the march and confronted him. This two-letter mark could easily become the GMJ. He watched the animal for a few moments and then yielded to a sudden decision.

Riding up to the top of the ridge he looked carefully all around the range. The odds were very great against making a lucky discovery, but he determined to go through with the play. If the brand had been recently altered he might be able to detect the added lines. As he drew near to the cow he loosed and shook out his rope. His horse had not been too well trained in working cattle, but it had been taught to hold



against the rope. The cast was well placed, and the cow went down, and the horse backed until the rope was taut and held it so. Hopalong leaped from the saddle and ran toward the captive. He parted the hair and examined the marks, but the brand gave no indication that new strokes had been added, and he arose, went back to his horse, and mounted. He sent the animal forward; the rope slacked, and the struggling cow got to its feet, stepped out of the loop, and lumbered away.

He had crossed the ranges of three of the Jones brothers and he knew that the fourth was nearer to Hancock, so he turned south. The country had been so rough and cut up that he had not been able to make good time and when he came to a wagon road he decided to follow it south for a while. Such a road would likely lead to Hancock, and he pushed on at better speed. It was almost dark when he saw another new brand; it was the MMJ. This time in his mind two more of the two-letter brands descended, one after the other, on this new Jones mark, and they each fitted nicely on it. In order to become the MMJ they both would have to be joined to new marks. He kneed the horse and pounded along the road toward town for by now he was oriented and knew about where it lay.

It was dark before he reached the town. Faint, yellow lamplight shone in patches on the board sidewalks and on the streets. The few saloons were noisy. Down the street the lantern over the hotel door was bright. As he rode past the open lot next to the hotel he saw that the stable lantern was dark, which meant that he might have to put up the horse by himself. That would be all right. He was hungry and he knew that the dining room had been closed for some time. Dismounting before the tie rail, he tossed the reins over it and pushed between the swinging doors.

There was a noisy poker game going on in the rear of the big room, but the players were not the ranchmen with whom he had played. One of these was the storekeeper, who looked up, nodded to him, and looked back at his cards.

The bartender wiped a dry counter with a damp cloth and frowned.

"Dinin' room's closed," he said. "You had yore supper yet? You want yore old room?"

"I haven't had my supper an' I want my old room," answered Hopalong, slapping a few layers of dust from his clothing. "I reckon th' stableman's gone home by this time, but that don't matter. All I need is a lantern an' th' key."

"Th' stableman's home is th' home of th' hosses," replied the bartender. "Ride around an' pound on th' office door. Chances are he ain't there but is in some saloon. But you might as well try."

"If he's there, ain't no use of wakin' him up," responded Hopalong. He slapped his big hat vigorously against a leg and blew the remaining dust from it. "Give me th' key an' a lantern, an' I'll make out all right by myself. Yore dinin' room may be closed, but I'm right shore th' kitchen can be opened. Turn me loose in there with a fryin' pan, some aigs, an' ham or bacon, an' I'll do myself proud. I'm hungry as hell an' I shore aim to eat."

The bartender's frown disappeared, and a grin took its place.

"I'll do all of them things, friend," he said and reached behind him to pick up a key from the back bar. "Here, take it. It's for th' padlock on th' big door. There's a lantern in th' kitchen. Wait a minute till I get it. While I'm after it I'll start a fire in th' stove an' light th' lamps. Be right back."

Hopalong walked toward the poker table and watched the storekeeper slam down his cards. The weazened old man swore viciously. This, too, was a friendly game, despite the cursing, played between friends and, evidently, businessmen, whose stores had been closed for the night; but it was tightly contested, and every pot was fiercely fought for. He watched the play and smiled at the banter and friendly insults until he heard the bartender return and then, taking the lighted lantern, he went out to his horse and led it along the side of the building.

The big door rolled back easily and without squeaks. Leading the horse into its former box stall, he turned and found the grain room. It was not long before the animal was contentedly munching while its master rubbed its back with the dry corners of the saddle blanket, and he took the time to do a thorough job. Opening the blanket and hanging it up to dry, he picked up the lantern, found a pail and then the pump. As he passed the office he could hear the snores of the stableman.

At last he was through and closed the big door silently, snapping the huge padlock, and then moved deliberately toward the kitchen door. It was locked. He had better luck with the rear door of the big main room and closed it behind him. The bartender held out his hand for the lantern, took it, raised the globe, and blew lustily. A wisp of stinking smoke dissipated itself, and the flame abruptly died.

"I lit th' lamp in th' dinin' room," said the man behind the counter. "On yore way back blow it out. Th' stove ought to be hot enough by now. I put out th' aigs an' bacon. There's a bowl of biled potatoes on th' table an' a bowl of grease. Won't take you long to slice an' brown 'em."

"I shore don't need nothin' to sharpen my appetite," said Hopalong with a wide grin, "but I've done a lot o£ ridin' an' I can do with a drink. I ain't as young as I used to be. Have one with me?"

"None of us are as young as we used to be," replied the bartender. He glanced up at the loudly ticking clock and nodded. He, too, was tired after being on his feet since seven that morning. It being the middle of the week, at this hour there would not be many more customers, and a drink would do him good. He sighed, took the bottle from Hopalong's hand, and half filled the small glass. They wiped their lips simultaneously and grinned at each other.

A sudden loud and triumphant laugh rang out in the rear of the room.

"I'U you to try to steal this pot!" cackled the storekeeper. "I'm callin', you damn hoss thief. What you got? Ha, ha, ha, ha! Still tryin' to fill an inside straight! Th' older you grow, th' dumber you get. Well, by Godfrey, here's a pair of sevens, an' they don't need to be even that big!" He suddenly stopped and looked around. "I like a six-hand game better'n a five hander. Hey, you cattle buyer! Yeah, you with th' four-dollar trail margin! You want to get into a rough-an'-tumble game an' mebbly lose yore pants an' shirt?"

Hopalong stopped short on his way to the dining-room door and chuckled.

"I got a big collection of shirts an' pants. Gimme a chance to eat first?" he asked.

Shore, but don't waste time bakin' no cake. Get a hump onto you."

Hopalong laughed and started walking again and in less than a minute found himself in the kitchen. The stove was hot, and it was not long before the bacon was sputtering in the pan. He liked his bacon dry and crisp and he cut through it when it humped up and pressed it down here and there against the pan. In another pan, frying slowly in bacon grease, were the sliced boiled potatoes, and the combination kept him busily turning. The bacon fished out and placed on a hot plate, its place was taken by four eggs, which sputtered and squiggled and trembled and heaved. He had no time to make coffee and did not need it. The drink under his belt had been a big one, and it was all alone in an empty stomach and calling for eggs and bacon and potatoes; and it was not long before the lonesome drink had plenty of company.

The sheriff was now at peace with the world, the long day's ride behind him and forgotten and a poker game just around the corner. He left the soiled dishes for the cook to take care of in the morning and pulled a half dollar out of a pocket and placed it beside them. If he had been a cat he would have purred. He blew out the lamps and made his way through the dining room, blowing out the lamp there. Enough light was coming in through the door to show him the way, despite the several tables in his path.

When he reached the big room he found that an additional chair had been drawn up to the table and that the players had shifted slightly to make room for it. Some of these men he had seen in the dining room on his last visit. He dropped onto the chair and tossed a silver dollar in front of the player who seemed to be the banker. This gentleman wore a star on his open vest, and it identified him as the town marshal. He also was the owner of the stage fine and livery stable. For the dollar he received twenty-five whites, five blues, and five reds and soon was in another game of penny-ante draw

poker and fighting like a cornered wildcat to hold his own. He had played all kinds of games during his fairly long life, but it was his considered opinion that straight draw poker was the king of them all.

# 12

BACK IN Twin River Johnny and Margaret Nelson stepped from the train, saw to their baggage, and waited. To their surprise there was no one there to meet them. They did not know that no one had bothered to send their letter out to the Double Y or that it had been so long on its way. After waiting nearly half an hour they walked up the street to the sheriff's office and tried the door. It was locked. While they stood in indecision they saw Rick Bradley returning from the post office, and just behind him rode Deputy Sheriff George, importantly scanning the legends on several envelopes. George glanced up, saw the couple before the office door, and pushed into a lope, a higher cloud of dust rising behind him. The puzzled expression on his face suddenly changed as recognition dawned.

"Hello, Nelson!" he exclaimed and swung down from the saddle, his big hat in a hand. He bobbed his head to Margaret and was grinning from ear to ear.

"Hello, George," replied Johnny. "Glad to see you ag'in. This is my wife. George is one of Hoppy's deputies, Margaret."

Glad to meet you, ma'am, ' said George, ducking his head again. He fished around in a trouser pocket, pulled out a key, opened the door, and waved his visitors in ahead of him. Then he swiftly followed, dusted off a chair with one hearty sweep of the Stetson, and pushed it toward Margaret. "Sit down, ma'am."

"Thank you," said Margaret and obeyed.

"Hoppy will be right sorry he missed you," said the deputy, glancing from one to the other. "He left town early yesterday mornin', an' I figger he may be gone quite some time. He didn't say anythin' about seein' you. Did he know you was comin' up here?"

"I wrote him that we were," said Johnny, frowning slightly. "Somethin' must have gone wrong, because nobody met us at th' station." He tossed his big hat onto the table and as he watched its flight and saw it settle safely he caught sight of an envelope lying to one side of the little pile of letters George had just placed there. "Why, *that's* my letter! How long has it been here?"

"Came yesterday mornin'," answered the deputy. "It's stamped 'Mis-sent.' It came in on th' mornin' train after Hoppy left. There ain't nobody come into town from th' ranch to get the mail since then. Hoppy alius took it out with him. Buck is gettin' old an' don't ride into town as often as he used to. Their mail don't amount to anythin', so they don't bother very much with it."

"Then nobody knows that we are here," said Margaret and laughed. "We can surprise them—and *won't* they be surprised! This is going to be fun. I can imagine the looks on their faces."

"Yeah," grunted Johnny with no enthusiasm and with a frown on his face. He held out his hand for the letter and examined it as if it were some strange bug. One of the postmarks was blurred and told him nothing.

"You might as well take this one too," said George, holding it out. "It just came in an' it's for Rose Peters."

"All right," agreed Johnny, pocketing it along with the other. He turned to his wife. "You might as well stay here till I get



th' hosses. I won't be long."

He walked along the street to Rick Bradley's livery stable, had a drink with Rick to celebrate the reunion, and soon rode up the street toward the sheriff's office, leading the second horse. He noticed a horseman riding up the trail toward town, but the rider was well south of the railroad tracks, and Johnny gave him no more than a passing glance. Tying the led horse to the rail before the office, he rode on to the station, made arrangements for the baggage to be held until Buck sent in the buckboard for it, and then mounted again and swung back toward the street. By this time the horseman coming up from the south was crossing the right of way, and Johnny glanced at him again. He pulled up abruptly and raised an arm high above his head.

"Mesquite! Mesquite Jenkins, or I'm a liar!" he shouted.

"Johnny! Where'n hell did *you* come from? Man, I'm shore glad to see you ag'in!"

"An' I'm shore glad to see you!" cried Johnny. "Just got here from th' SV as straight as we could travel. How are you?"

"O. K. You look right pert. How's everythin' out at th' ranch?"

"Don't know," answered Johnny. "Just got here this mornin' on th' train. You been away?"

"Yeah. Been down visitin' Tex an' Jane. You just said 'we.' Then you ain't alone."

"No. Margaret's with me. When you goin' out to th' ranch? Where you headin' now?" asked Johnny.

"Out to th' Double Y right away," answered Mesquite. "I don't see no buckboard. Didn't nobody meet you at th'

train?”

Johnny had swung even with him by now and explained the situation as they rode slowly up the street, stirrup to stirrup. Stirrup to stirrup—so many, many men rode that way in the early, formative days of the West. At one time these two riders had been like a dynamite cartridge and a fulminating cap, with results unpredictable, but now they thoroughly understood each other and were loyal friends. And in those days loyalty was very likely to be put to stern and sudden tests.

“So Hoppy’s gone off somewhere?” queried Mesquite with a slight frown. “It’s just my bad luck to get back too late to catch him. Seein’ he must be on th’ sheriff’s business, I figger he’s smelled out somethin’ he don’t like, an’ that’s when I shore like to be with him.”

“I figger th’ same,” replied Johnny. “An’ that’s when I like to be with him. Damn it, I come up here to see him more than anybody else,” he complained. “If he ain’t back in a few days I’m shore goin’ off lookin’ for him. I ain’t goin’ back home without seein’ him.” He hesitated a moment, glancing quickly at his companion. “If he don’t get back here in a few days I don’t suppose you’d feel like makin’ another long hossback ride?”

While Mesquite’s smile was faint it was encouraging.

“We don’t know where he went,” he slowly replied. “There’s a lot of country up here to ride over, lookin’ for just one man. If he don’t get back in a few days I reckon I could stand th’ ride if George or Mike can tell us where to start lookin’.”

Johnny’s eyes lighted, and he nodded. They drew up before the office as Margaret stepped through the door.

“Mesquite!” she cried, taking a quick step forward and holding out her hand. “I’m very glad to see you!”

Mesquite’s hat was off, and he swung to the ground, took the hand, and showed his white teeth in a broad smile.

“I’m mighty glad to see you again, Mrs. Nelson, mighty glad.

Won’t th’ folks out at th’ ranch be tickled an’ surprised when they see who’s come to visit ‘em?”

“I hope so,” she laughingly replied. “How were they when you last saw them?”

“Right fine. Of course you may notice a difference—it’s been some years since you saw them. Buck looks older, but Rose don’t seem to have aged very much. She’s a wonderful woman. I’m right sorry you missed Hoppy, an’ he’ll be sorry, too, when he learns there was nobody at th’ station to meet you, an’ with his office right there in town.” He chuckled. “But th’ answer to that is easy: all you have to do is stay on till he gets back.”

Johnny frowned and shook his head.

“That’s all right if he comes back soon,” he said, “but I don’t figger on waitin’ too long.” He looked searchingly at the deputy, and that person almost imperceptibly shook his head, his eyes alertly on Margaret. Johnny glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and then looked at Mesquite. “If we only knowed how long he was goin’ to be away,” he said thoughtfully.

George believed that he was beginning to get the proper understanding of the situation, and he cleared his throat gently, as if to ease the lie which seemed to be stuck crosswise in it, but as he did so he again shook his head.

Free and open discussion of the matter seemed to be greatly hampered.

“Why don’t you wait a couple of days and then come back to town?” he suggested uneasily but hopefully. “There ain’t no use goin’ off on no wild-goose hunt.” He cleared his throat again. “Why don’t you go on out an’ visit Buck an’ Rose for two, three days? By that time we may have some word from Hoppy.” He became conscious that Margaret had been studying him, and still was, and he felt anything but comfortable. Not being a married man, he had no personal experience of the tight and perpetual tyranny of the so-called weaker sex, but some of his friends were married, and he had made good use of his eyes and ears. If a man fought back and tried to retain some of his freedom of action that meant trouble in the family; if he surrendered for the sake of peace that meant he would do as he was told.

Johnny chuckled and glanced at Mesquite.

“All right,” he assented, “but I ain’t goin’ back home till I’ve seen him, whether he comes back or not.” He hesitated for a moment, but before he could say anything else his wife spoke up.

Margaret’s lips were pressed rather tightly together, and her eyes were very bright.

“Which means, as I understand it,” she said very distinctly, “that if he doesn’t come back you’ll take that excuse to go off hunting for him and get yourself into a lot of unnecessary trouble?”

Johnny squirmed slightly and put on his best air of innocence, glanced at Mesquite for moral support, found no signs of any, saw that George was tremendously interested in something up the street, and then glanced at his wife.

“Trouble?” he asked. “What trouble? I don’t see where any trouble is goin’ to happen just because we might ride off to find Hoppy. You want to see him, too, don’t you? If I go huntin’ for him it’ll be as much for you as for me. He don’t even know we’re here. I aim to let him know. We shore want to see him, don’t we?”

“I’m glad you said *we*,” retorted Margaret, who needed only to search the past, which she already was doing, to be certain that trouble and danger always had a way of putting in an appearance whenever her husband and Hopalong Cassidy got loose together somewhere on the range or even off of it. Johnny had spoken freely and with pride of the more stirring incidents of his life, and the tales were not of the kind to sooth the feelings of a wife. She stepped to the horses and mounted the one with the sidesaddle and as her husband mechanically pulled the reins from the rail and handed them to her she swung the animal around and headed up the street in a cloud of dust which climbed higher and moved more rapidly and steadily toward the trail leading to the Double Y.

Her beloved husband, having fought down his helling propensities for several years and now feeling that he had not gotten entirely rid of them, slowly took his eyes from her and turned to grin sheepishly at his companions. Mesquite’s cold face told nothing, but George’s manly countenance bore a wide grin.

“You married, George?” asked Johnny.

“Not by a damn sight, an’ I don’t figger to be,” frankly answered the deputy, exhaling gustily and with great satisfaction.

"You might be better off if you was," countered Johnny rather sharply.

"Yeah, I *might*," chuckled George. "Mesquite, here, ain't married neither. We're both mavericks, an' I figger to stay that way. If I want to throw my clothes on th' floor an' hang up my boots there ain't no argument about it with nobody."

In Mesquite's mind was the picture of Sarah Jordan, and his emotions were beginning to riot again, but he knew that he was a tumbleweed and never would be anything else and that he would only bring worry and sorrow to any woman he married. He found himself nodding to what the deputy was saying: they both were mavericks, their ears uncropped, their hides unbranded, and he, too, intended to stay that way. Without a word he swung on a heel, took a few quick steps, jerked at his tie rope, vaulted the rail, and seemed to bounce into the saddle.

Johnny, again glancing up the street and along the trail leading from it, jerked loose his own tie rope, likewise vaulted and bounced; and knee to knee, saying nothing, they stirred the dust of the street to even greater heights as they raced to overcome the lead which Margaret had gained.

# 13

A FEW DAYS later Johnny and Mesquite rode into town again, this time in a wagon, dropped to a walk, and stopped before the post office. The scant mail for the Double Y contained no letter from the still missing sheriff. They both were familiar with his wretched handwriting.

"I knew it," growled Johnny, climbing up to the seat. "That damn redhead wouldn't write a letter if he was paid to."

"There may be some word from him at th' office," suggested Mesquite, but without much hope.

"Then that's where we're goin'," grunted Johnny, picking up the reins and speaking to the team.

Both deputies were in the office playing California Jack for matches, and they looked up and grinned cheerfully at the newcomers, waving inviting hands toward the table, and indicated two chairs.

"Don't like th' stakes," said Johnny with a laugh, "an' Mesquite, here, don't know one card from another."

"If that's so," said Mike with a chuckle, "we'll let him set in an' play for money."

Mesquite smiled faintly.

"If I set in on yore money game," he said, "I wouldn't want to run no blazer on you. I've been visitin' Tex Ewalt, an' he can teach a man a whole lot about cards, mostly poker, in three weeks. I figger, mebby, I can hold my own with you." He looked from one deputy to the other. "What we come in for is to find out if you've had any word from Hoppy."

George placed his cards face-down on the table and pushed back his chair a little.

"If Tex Ewalt has been teachin' you how to play cards there won't be any money game a-tall," he said with a wide grin. "An' we ain't heard nothin' from Hopalong an' we ain't doin' no worryin' about him. Not even a little bit."

"Where did he ride to?" asked Johnny, placing a foot on a chair and resting an elbow on a knee. "An' what for?"

“He went over to Hancock,” answered Mike, “though he may not be stayin’ in town. If he is in town he’ll be at th’ hotel, an’ there’s only one there.”

“Frank Lorimer reckons he’s had some cattle stole off him,” said George, answering the second question.

“How do you get to Hancock?” asked Johnny curiously. “I’ve put in a lot of time ridin’ around this part of th’ country but I never even heard of that town.”

“Me, neither,” said Mesquite.

“Wait till I draw you a map,” said Mike, pushing back his chair and looking around for a piece of paper. He and George had used up the sheriff’s supply of ripped envelopes, playing ticktacktoe. The first drawer he opened had a sheet. It was the train-robbery poster, and its back was blank. For an instant he hesitated and then picked it up. That train robbery was ancient history by now. At least that was his opinion. Sitting down at the desk he began, carefully and laboriously, to draw some lines and make some dots and Xs. When he had completed the task he motioned to Johnny and Mesquite, and they joined him, looking down on the map as he explained it.

“He’s got two ways to come back to *this* place,” said Mike, placing a finger on one of the marks, “but he ain’t likely to ride no other way from there on till he gets to Two Butte Creek, which is here. When he gets there he can turn off this right-hand trail an’ head for th’ ranch or keep on comin’ along this main trail if he’s headin’ for Twin River, which is *here*” He shoved the map toward Johnny and dropped the pencil. “It might be better if you waited a week.”

“I don’t like that idear,” growled Johnny, his eyes on the map. “A week cuts too much out of our stay up here. It won’t



leave much time for visitin' with Hoppy."

"There's this about it," said George, struck by a sudden thought. "If he's on his way back an' you fellers start ridin' to Hancock you might miss him. If you start from th' ranch he may have passed Two Butte Creek an' be headin' for town; if you start from here he may be ridin' toward th' ranch. An' if that happens you'll be ridin' around lookin' for a man that ain't there. Better wait a little longer."

"Did he ride that long-diamond hoss?" asked Mesquite thoughtfully.

"Yeah," answered Mike.

"That hoss had new shoes since I left?" He smiled at the slow shaking of heads. "All right. I'm a tracker an' I'd know th' tracks of th' shoes of that hoss anywhere. Th' end of one of th' caulks is broke off. If he took one way while we was ridin' along th' other I'd know it as soon as we got to Two Butte Creek. If I saw it we'd know what to do."

"Unless he has had some new shoes put on over in Hancock or has had to get him another hoss," said Mike. "Better stay here a mite longer an' play it safe."

"All right," said Johnny in sudden decision. "We'll wait a while longer, but it won't be a week. A few more days. If he ain't back by then we'll go lookin' for him. An' we won't

have to take any chance on that hoss shoe bein' changed. One of us will ride from th' ranch, an' th' other from here. If one of us don't get to Two Butte Creek an' meet th' other, th' one that does get there will know that th' other has met Hoppy an' can turn an' ride after 'em." He folded the map, put it in his pocket, and started for the door. "Come on,

Mesquite, if yo're ready. We'll get th' groceries an' stuff an' go on back to th' ranch."

"Wait a minute," said George suddenly. He gently scratched his head while he thought the matter out. "Hoppy said that his name was Jones while he's out of town. Said he's a cattle buyer, makin' up trail herds. He wouldn't take me or Mike with him. I dunno if he'd like to have any old friends drop in to see him. They might tip his hand. Mebby you better wait for him to come back here."

Johnny laughed softly, shook his head, and looked at Mesquite.

"If we find him he won't be visited by any old friends or by anybody he knows," he said, and chuckled. This would be like old times. "Not unless he shows us that he wants to be visited. None of us is a fool, an' we've worked together slick as grease for a mighty long time. We can even use th' sign language. Looks like we'll mebby work together again. I shore hope so." He grunted with contentment. Hoppy was the best partner a man ever had when trouble broke, and this cold, deadly quiet Mesquite bobcat at his side rated mighty high as men were rated in those places and those times. Like old times, by God! He glanced at his quiet companion. "What you say, Mesquite?"

"Sounds good to me, now we got a line on what he's over there for," answered Mesquite. "What you say we load th' wagon pronto an' pull out for th' ranch?"

"All right," replied Johnny and then swiftly reversed himself, a domestic picture in his thoughts. "No. We don't wait no longer. There ain't no need to. We know where he is an' we can cover th' forked trails. We start tomorrow mornin'. We got to split an' each of us ride one of them trails until they

join. If we both go back to th' ranch one of us will have to ride back here in th' mornin' an' waste just that much time. I'll help you load th' wagon but I'll stay here in town tonight. Anyhow, I ain't had a game with Rick Bradley an' th' rest of th' boys for too long a time. Come on, let's load th' wagon. You got th' list?"

Mesquite nodded and swung toward the door, Johnny almost stepping on his spurs, and as he stepped onto the street he was whistling "Oh, Susannah."

George followed them to the door, watched them climb up to the wagon seat, swing the team around, and go rolling up the street toward the general store. They saw the wagon stop in front of Rick Bradley's livery stable and heard Johnny's bellow. George was grinning in the door, Mike in the window.

"Hi, Rick!" shouted Johnny, and in a moment Rick stood in the door and swapped grins with him. "I want th' best hoss you got an' a good saddle tomorrow mornin' right after sunup. Th' one I had before is all right, I reckon. How about gettin' th' boys together for a game at th' hotel tonight?"

Rick had not enjoyed much luck in the games at the hotel recently.

"There's been too damn many boys got together too damn many times at th' hotel lately," he growled; "but I'm just sucker enough to round 'em up an' try ag'in. Mebby you'll change my luck. What stakes *you* countin' on?"

"Two bits an' a dollar."

"Hell with that! Make it five an' ten, an' I'll get th' party together."

“Five an’ ten’s a kid’s game!” protested Johnny.

“For th’ last few times I figgered that I ain’t growed up,” retorted the liveryman. “We’re all friends, ain’t we? Why not play a friendly game?”

“All right, sonny,” chuckled Johnny. “You can make it penny ante if you want to. It’s th’ game I’m thinkin’ of with that gang an’ not th’ stakes. Adios. See you tonight.”

The wagon rolled on again, dust enveloping it. A dog dashed out, fiercely barking. Men on the sidewalks raised their hands in salutes. George slowly turned from the door and walked back toward the table and the interrupted game as Mike left the window. He sat down and made no move to pick up his cards.

“Mike, you figger you could run this office by yourself?” he asked.

“I’d ask you th’ same question, only we got orders to stay here,” replied Mike. He reached for his hand. “What’s eatin’ you? What’s so funny?”

“Huh! Nelson said I might be better off if I was married!” he answered and grinned widely and wisely. “That hombre ain’t been so downright happy for months as he is right now. He’s got it all set to play poker with th’ gang an’ get himself a skinful. You noticed that he picked *his self* for th’ man to stay in town? Hah! An’ him with a wife waitin’ for him at th’ Double Y. Ha, ha, ha!”

“There’s mebbly more to it than just th’ boys, th’ game, an’ th’ skinful,” replied Mike with a grin. “By stayin’ in town he shore can’t get in no argument with her about takin’ a ride that may lead him right smack into some gun fightin’.”

“Well,” said George after a moment’s thought, “you can’t rightly blame her for that, can you?”

Shortly after daylight the following morning two men rode eastward in the direction of Hancock. Mesquite Jenkins, from the Double Y, well supplied with food and following the northern branch of the split trail, heading for the junction at Two Butte Creek. To the south of him, riding along the lower branch trail, was Johnny Nelson, also well supplied and heading for the same point; and Johnny had taken some pains not to “get a skinful,” although he could have done with more sleep. If either of them met Hopalong returning either to the ranch or to Twin River that rider would, by a new agreement worked out in the wagon the day before, keep on riding to the creek to inform the other, and both would then ride back to the town or the ranch, as the case might be. If Hopalong were not met then they would ride on together from the trail junction and go on to Hancock.

Johnny reached the creek late in the afternoon, saw no sign of his friend, and made camp. This consisted of unsaddling, turning the horse loose to graze after rubbing its back dry, and collecting firewood, which was not too plentiful. He unrolled his blanket and placed the coffeepot, frying pan, and the bundle of food near the meager pile of wood. He saw no ants. Daylight waned while he waited, and then, seeing Mesquite ride up over a low ridge a few hundred yards away, he started the economical Indian fire and placed the loaded coffeepot close to his hand. And so they camped and so they rode until the map showed them that the next night would find them in Hancock but they knew that they could not reach the town until too late to find the hotel dining room open. They still had food left and when they came to a clear, sweet creek about an hour before twilight they stopped to cook their last meal in the open.

As the few tin dishes were washed, dried, and put back in the bedrolls Johnny took one more look at the sprawled map and was about to crumple it and toss it away when, remembering what was printed on the other side, folded it, instead, and pushed it into a pocket. Mike might have made a mistake of using this particular poster, although both Johnny and Mesquite, having nothing to do, had both read and reread the description and knew it by heart, but memorizing the numbers had been too tough a task.

Putting out the fire, they climbed into their saddles and started off on the last leg of their journey. Through the gathering darkness they looked for the first gleams of the lights of Hancock.

"Goin' under our own names?" asked Mesquite as a mere formality, breaking a long silence.

"Reckon not," answered Johnny.

"That's what I figgered," replied Mesquite. "Folks far an' wide, even up here, must have heard of you, an' I've been quite active. Mesquite ain't no common name this far north."

"If we pick new ones they ought to be easy to remember."

"Shore," agreed Mesquite, nodding his head in the dark. "Yore first name is all right. It would be enough except that we got to register at th' hotel an' perhaps be introduced all around. What was yore wife's maiden name? Arnold, ain't it?"

"Yeah," answered Johnny. "All right, Johnny Arnold. How about you?"

"I'll be yore kid brother, Kid Arnold. I answer to Kid without no thought."

# 14

HOPALONG, a big breakfast under his vest, left the dining room and smiled at the man behind the bar. The bartender looked at him and nodded a welcome.

"You must have changed yore mind about trail-herd margins," said the latter, "seein' you've come back ag'in."

"No," slowly replied the sheriff. "All th' change I made was in th' direction I was ridin'." He grinned. "You can't hardly blame a man for not passin' yore dinin' room if it's within half a day's ride. What are we goin' to have for supper tonight?" "You askin' that when you've just had breakfast?" chuckled the bartender. "We're havin' smoked beef tongue, fresh beet greens, mashed potatoes, hoss-radish, an' a couple more things. You must be aimin' to stay overnight."

"Seein' that I ain't got nothin' much to do for th' next month," replied the sheriff, "I may figger to stay a week or two." He grinned again, a little apologetically. "I never ate better grub an' I like th' boys an' th' way they play poker. Why you askin'?"

"If you stay a week I'll give you th' weekly rate," explained the bartender. "Seven days for th' price of six, which includes yore hoss."

"Well, I reckon we can figger on a week if that whiskered Jones coyote don't chase me out of town."

"You chase easy?" carelessly asked the bartender, a faint smile on his face.

“Not *too* easy,” answered Hopalong. He suddenly remembered something. “You got my clothes back from th’ washwoman?”

“Yeah,” grunted the bartender, bending down and then coming up with a small bundle in his hand. “Let’s see, you’ve paid for this already, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” answered Hopalong as he took the bundle. “I’ll change into ’em tomorrow an’ give you another bundle for her.” He rubbed his chin. “By gosh, I’m out of socks ag’in. I can wear holes in a pair of socks quick as any man alive, I reckon.”

“There’s socks in that bundle,” reminded the bartender. “I reckon yore nails are too long.”

“Yeah, there’s two pairs here,” admitted Hopalong, and smiled. “That ain’t where I wear th’ holes.”

“Then yore boots don’t fit you. They’re too loose at th’ heel,” said the man behind the counter.

“Reckon I’ll go out an’ look at th’ town ag’in,” said the sheriff, turning toward the door.

“Dinin’ room is open twelve to one,” cautioned the bartender, again wiping off the counter.

The proprietor of the general store peered over his steel-rimmed spectacles as the customer closed the door and strode toward the counter.

“Howdy,” grunted the old man.

“Howdy,” replied Hopalong. “I want a couple of blue bandannas,” he said, not wanting to buy any socks now that



the bartender knew that he had two fresh pairs. News had a way of traveling in a town like this, and a man could always find good use for extra handkerchiefs.

The proprietor pulled a box from a shelf behind him and placed the bandannas on the counter.

"These are big uns," he said. "Four bits. Anythin' else?"

"Reckon not," answered Hopalong, reaching into a pocket. He pulled out a buckskin sack secured by a rawhide thong. Loosening the thong, he upended the sack and caught a double eagle as it slid out into his hand.

"Ain't you got nothin' smaller'n that?" demanded the proprietor with some asperity.

"Reckon that's th' size of 'em," answered the sheriff. He chuckled. "Too big for you?"

The storekeeper bridled, and the spectacles did a short dance on his nose.

" 'Tain't a damn bit too big for me to handle," he retorted. "It's just that I hate to part with so much small change on a four-bit sale. It'll mebbly leave me short of change. An' you call that big?" He snorted. "Big, huh? Do you still want big bills for yore heavy money?"

"Yeah," slowly admitted the sheriff, wearing his poker face, "but I want bigger bills than what you got."

"Hell you say!" snapped the storekeeper, shoving a hand into a hip pocket and bringing out a sadly worn buckskin wallet. He opened it and pulled out a bill, holding it so that his customer could see the corners. "You reckon *that's* big enough for you?"

Hopalong continued to maintain his poker face as he saw the numbers on the yellow back. Then he leaned forward, his face expressing a great surprise.

"Sweet Beulah land!" he muttered. "Do I see a five an' two ciphers on that?"

"That's just exactly what you see," chortled the proprietor. "Ain't you never seen one of these before?"

"No," countered Hopalong quickly, thoughts streaming through his mind. "Have you?" he challenged.

"Well, now, I ain't," confessed the storekeeper.

"I've heard tell of 'em," said the sheriff. "Ain't that Abe Lincoln's picture?"

"It shore is. Old Abe. You reckon this is big enough for your

"Why, I reckon so," slowly answered the sheriff, absent-mindedly hefting the buckskin sack in his hand. "Mebby it's too big. How do I know it's good?"

The storekeeper snorted indignantly.

"I wouldn't have took it if it wasn't good," he replied, rubbing thumb and forefinger on the bill.

"But you just said you never saw one before?" demanded the sheriff dubiously. "How do I know that this is a good bill? How would you know a counterfeit if you saw one?"

"That's my business," retorted the proprietor sharply. "When it comes to bills of any kind I'm right careful. I'm so careful that I even writ down th' number of this un an' who gave it to me." He glanced at a spot on the wall and nodded. "I'd

keep it, only it's too big for me. Can't make change with it. You want it, or don't you?"

Hopalong considered for a few moments, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. He did not want to be too eager, or eager at all, if he could help it.

"Yes, I'll risk it. I never had a single hunk of money as big as that in all my life," replied the sheriff, his eyes on it, trying to read the number. He grinned foolishly. "That won't weigh down one laig of a man's pants. Here, count 'em as they fall," he said, and the gold coins slid out of the sack and onto the counter, and he pushed them forward one by one. "You count five hundred?"

"You lemme do my own pushin'," snapped the proprietor. "You might be a three-shell expert, for all I know." He did his own pushing and then, to make doubly certain, stacked the double eagles into little piles of five each. Looking up, he nodded, swept the coins into his hands, and dumped them into his pockets. Then, and only then, he held out the Abe Lincoln yellow back.

Hopalong took it reluctantly, looked at it curiously, turned it over, his memory struggling to bring to mind the exact number written on that piece of paper in his pocket. Finally he folded it, slipped it into the buckskin sack, and put them away in a pocket. He dug up another double eagle, took his change and his bandannas, rolled himself a smoke, and sat lazily on the edge of the counter.

"Where'n hell did you ever get a bill like that?" he asked with pardonable curiosity, glad that the storekeeper had made a record of its number. This would be very important if things turned out as he hoped they would.

"Got it from one of th' boys," carelessly answered the proprietor. "I got it from Len Danvers, of th' LD, over east of town. He was in here a couple of days ago to stock up for th' fall. Him an' Ben Peterson, his neighbor farther east."

"That LD ain't no gold mine, instead of a ranch, is it?" asked the sheriff with a chuckle.

"No, but Len sold off some of his cattle last fall an' had to take that bill for 'em," replied the storekeeper and then he swore suddenly as a loud thump sounded from the front of the store. Both men glanced around and saw a drunk carom from the frame of a window and start tacking across the street. "If he'd busted that winder I'd bust his neck, th' damn no-'count bum!"

"Well, he didn't, though he come near enough," said the sheriff. "You sound like you don't think much of him."

"No more than I did of his father before him," growled the storekeeper, "but there's one thing in favor of his father—*he's dead.*"

"Who is he?" idly asked the sheriff.

"Tim Thompson. He breaks hosses when he's sober," answered the proprietor. "Can't nobody beat him ridin' wild uns when he ain't drunk, which ain't too often. Handy with rope an' brandin' iron too. It would be God's mercy to his mother if he tackled a mean un when he was drunk. It might break his damn neck. She runs a boardin'house an' takes in washin' an' mendin' as well, an' that damn bum just about keeps her busted. How them Jones boys can stand havin' him around all th' time is more than I can savvy, but they do, an' they try to keep him away from town. I hear he usually gets drunk on one of their ranches, an' they keep him there till he sobers up, but this time he's jumped to

town to get tanked up. Reckon he had a yearnin for that scotch liquor that Abner drinks.”

“He works for th’ Joneses, huh?” idly asked Hopalong, hoping for more information, however apparently trivial.

“Yeah. I reckon they hire him between ’em. Leastwise he goes from one Jones ranch to another, bustin’ their hosses. Them Jones boys wouldn’t tackle a bronc. They like to think they’re cowmen, but I’m willin’ to bet even money they none of ’em ever saw a ranch till they come out here.” He was filling a stinking pipe and now got it going. “Be that as it may, they shore are gettin’ along right well,” he grudgingly admitted. “I don’t like none of ’em, except Sam, an’ Abner’s a damn bully.” “I’ve heard they’re gettin’ along right well an’ rapid,” replied the sheriff. “Fastest growin’ outfits hereabout I’ve been told.” “Yeah, but it ain’t from nat’ral increase alone,” replied the storekeeper. “They been buyin’ heavy.”

“I saw Abner Jones a few days ago,” commented Hopalong. “How a man can wear whiskers like them in th’ summer time I shore can’t understand.” He paused, and added: “He must have been a right good-lookin’ hombre before he grew ’em. Was he?”

“Don’t know,” answered the proprietor. “He was wearin’ ’em when he first come here. All them boys wear whiskers. They save a lot of shavin’.”

“That reminds me,” said the sheriff, running a hand over his face. “Is th’ barber any good? I get tired of shavin’ myself—an’ my razor ain’t too sharp—but not tired enough to grow a crop of whiskers like Abner’s.”

“Th’ barber is a good un, an’ he keeps his razors mighty sharp. I like th’ job he does an’ let him shave me every time I get my hair cut. An’ he can talk as good as he shaves. Too

much, I reckon. I kinda like to drowse when I get in a barber's chair, but you can't do no good drowsin' with that feller."

"Oh well," laughed the sheriff, his eyes on those of the proprietor, "I don't reckon he does anybody any harm with his talk."

"I wouldn't lay a bet on that," grunted the storekeeper. "You come back here to buy some trail cattle?"

Hopalong hesitated. For the last few years Buck and himself could have sold more cattle than they cared to part with. If he was forced to buy a few hundred head to justify his presence in this part of the country he could do so without taking a loss if he stuck pretty close to his overlarge trail margin, even if prices did drop a little.

"I got my trail herds made up for this year," he replied. "I thought I'd look th' country over an' get a general idear about conditions over this way. I might be able to do some business next spring."

"You won't do no business over this way unless you change yore trail margin," growled the storekeeper. "I never heard of such figgers for short drives."

Hopalong laughed and pushed the big hat back on his head.

"With a lot of little ranches scattered to hell an' gone over a big section of country, you got to spend a lot of time an' do a lot of ridin', pickin' up a few head here an' a few head there.

That means yore riders are drawin' down too much pay. It takes too long to get a sizable herd together. Also, that margin may keep me from doin' a lot of arguin' about not

buyin' cattle that I really don't want to buy right now. When th' time comes that I *want* th' cattle th' margin will be about right for all concerned." He turned and headed for the door. "Well, see you in another poker game right soon, I hope. So long."

"You mebbby will. So long."

# 15

HOPALONG knew that the barber was not busy because he was standing in the door of his shop looking down the street at the erratic progress of the drunk, who from time to time had steadied and rested himself by leaning for moments against some handy support. The barber stepped back to allow his new customer to enter the shop. He waved the sheriff onto the chair and reached for the big cloth.

"Shave," grunted Hopalong, sighing gratefully as the chair tipped back. "Twice over. That hombre shore has a skinful."

"He shore has," agreed the tonsorial artist, "but no more'n usual. I'm surprised they let him come to town all liquored up like that. Usually they won't."

"That so?" asked Hopalong. "Mebby he loaded up after he got here."

"Mebby," agreed the barber, rubbing in the lather. "As a matter of fact, I'd bet that's it. They keep him on one of their ranches when he's drunk. I've even known one of 'em to come in after him an' take him back to th' ranch."

"There ain't no sense to that," commented the customer, "but I reckon mebbly he's a fightin' an' dangerous drunk. They could take his gun away from him an' let him stay loose."

"No, that ain't it," denied the barber. "He's too talkative, is th' way I figger it."



“That ain’t no reason for keepin’ a man from goin’ to town to get liquored up,” objected the sheriff, keeping his ears wide-open.

“Mebby it is an’ mebby it ain’t,” said the barber. He wiped his hands and fell to stropping the razor. Hopalong squirmed into a more comfortable position and closed his eyes. This was the first time in his life that he wanted to listen to a barber talk. His first unspoken question was quickly answered: the razor was as sharp as any he ever had known. Then the second: this man was a first-class workman. He sighed gently and pushed up his chin.

“Reckon yo’re a stranger here,” said the man with the razor.

“Uh-huh,” grunted the sheriff.

“Aimin’ to stay with us?”

“Uh-uh.”

“You ain’t a travelin’ man?” asked the barber.

“No, I ain’t, but I’ve shore done a lot of it in my time,” replied Hopalong lazily. “I buy up cattle an’ drive ’em to th’ railroads an’ ship ’em.”

“Most folks up here ain’t sellin’,” said the barber, pinching one corner of his customer’s mouth and deftly touching the spot with the end of his blade. “Oh, there’s some, I reckon, but they ain’t th’ biggest ranches. Be another year, mebby, before th’ big fellers do any beef sellin’ or drivin’.”

“How’s that?” asked the sheriff.

“Most of their beef cattle ain’t full growed yet. In another year there’ll be a lot of them that will have their full weight.”

"Who are th' big fellers?" asked Hopalong, steering the conversation.

"Th' Jones brothers. That drunk you just saw works for 'em. They all wear full beards. When they first come here only two of 'em did, but they all had 'em before spring come around. I reckon beards save men a lot of punishment up here in th' winter."

"Reckon they do," agreed the customer drowsily. He was as alert as a scared cat but trying not to show it. "Which of th' brothers are th' two that had their beards from th' beginnin'?" The barber paused for an instant and then went to work again.

"That's a funny question," he said, and began to cogitate. "Now, damn if that ain't funny. I ain't shore. I don't see 'em very often. I reckon it was Ed or George. No—it might have been Matt or Tom. Well, it's nothin' of any importance, so it don't make no difference."

"Nope," grunted the customer, turning his head under the gently pushing fingers of the barber. "Well, if I find I need any more cattle I can buy 'em from th' little ranches."

"I ain't so shore about that," replied the man with the razor, stropping again. He put the brush back into the mug and dried his hands again. "If you'd come up here last summer or early fall you might have bought quite a lot, addin' 'em all up, but th' Jones boys began to buy about then, an' I reckon they got th' pick. They drove in quite a few herds from over west somewhere." He paused for breath and asked a question which should have been asked sooner. "Razor all right?"

"Couldn't be better. Funny about that drunk bein' kept away from town when he gets loaded up. Don't reckon I'd stand

for that if I was him."

"I reckon mebbby you would *if* you was him," replied the barber, wiping his hands again. "You don't know them Jones boys, specially Abner. I've heard tell that he's th' quickest man with a gun ever seen in these parts an' I know he's hell on wheels with his hands an' feet at rough-an'-tumble."

"You don't shoot a man or lick hell out of him just because he wants to go to town when he's drunk," growled the sheriff. "If he don't do what you want pay him off an' get rid of him." "Well, you might beat him up if you had a hell of a temper," said the barber. "You don't know them Joneses, specially Abner." "An' I'm damn shore I don't want to know 'em," retorted the sheriff. "Which Jones does Thompson work for?"

"All of 'em, turn an' turn about, so I've heard," answered the barber and rubbed in the lather for the go-over. "Nice weather we're havin', even if it is a mite too dry. I don't like so much dust. We ain't had no rain since I don't know when."

"Yeah," assented Hopalong. "I got a razor in my roll. How'd you like to put a better edge on it? It needs one."

"Bring it in," replied the barber. "I can't promise anythin' about it. Razors look alike, but that's as far as it goes. Don't reckon there are half a dozen out of a hundred, takin' 'em as they come, that are perfect. Years ago, before I came out to this part of th' country, I used to have a job honin' razors for a big import company an' I know what I'm talkin' about. But bring it in, an' I'll see what I can do with it, though I won't guarantee that it'll hold its edge very long." He washed his customer's face. "Bay rum?"

Hopalong grunted assent.

"You got some long hairs in yore nose an' ears," said the barber, who thus proved that he was, in truth, a very good barber. "You want 'em clipped?"

A moment later the sheriff got out of the chair and stretched luxuriously and yawned prodigiously.

"I should have had my hair cut, what's left of it," he said, offering a two-bit piece. "Well, that can wait till tomorrow. I just can't help thinkin' about them Joneses keepin' a man from town when he gets drunk. An' them beards. Why a man wants a lot of bristles on his face I can't imagine."

"Well, a man who starts his beard too late shore does get bristles," said the barber. "If a man wants to grow a good beard, one that's soft an' silky, he wants to let it grow when he's young an' never put a razor to his face. Now, you take Sam Jones, th' gardener out back: he's got as soft a beard as any I've ever trimmed."

Hopalong's thoughts were racing again. It beat all how much wheat a man could winnow from a bushel of gossip. Sam Jones this very minute had been eliminated from being the man on the train. There usually was more than one way to approach a subject and learn facts. He would have to go farther in this subject of beards.

"That so?" he carelessly asked. "All th' rest of 'em are bristly, huh?"

"Well, Matt's ain't so bad. His is near as soft as Sam's."

The sheriff had one more answer: the two men who were wearing beards when they first came to this part of the country, and the odds were against either of them being the man on the train, whom the porter had so well described. He put on his coat and Stetson and turned toward the door.

“See you tomorrow, I reckon,” he said and stepped to the street.

He saw the drunk standing in the door of the hotel, and the bartender was arguing with him and slowly pushing and supporting him onto the sidewalk. Hopalong stopped and leaned against the corner of a building until the bartender had won out and sent the drunk once more on his weaving, stumbling way. The sheriff got going again, pushed between the little doors, and the bartender swung around quickly and belligerently.

“Didn’t I tell—oh!” he said, his frown swiftly fading. “I thought you was somebody else,” he apologized.

“Well, ain’t I?” asked the sheriff with a broad grin.

“Huh? Ain’t you what?”

“Ain’t I somebody else?” asked Hopalong, the grin growing.

“Uh!” grunted the bartender and slowly scratched his head. “Yeah, I reckon mebbe you are. That damn bar fly ain’t buzzin’ around here as long as I got my strength.”

“Drunks wouldn’t be so bad if they stayed at home when they was drunk, instead of ramblin’ around makin’ nuisances of themselves,” said Hopalong. “What does he do for a livin’?”

“Breaks hosses an’ punches for th’ Jones brothers. He’s their only hired hand.”

“They must have a lot of broken hosses, then, an’ with no outfits to ride ’em. They also in th’ hoss business?”

“Not that I know of,” answered the bartender. “I don’t figger he puts in all his time breakin’ hosses. They may use him for line ridin’ an’ other jobs. He’s a first-rate puncher when he’s sober.”

“When he gets drunk he ought to stay out of town,” said Hopalong.

“Yeah, he should, an’ that’s another thing I’m-” said the bartender, but checked his words, rounded the near end of the counter and took up his regular position. Without thinking, he reached for the bar cloth.

The sheriff rested an arm on his side of the bar and looked his companion in the eye.

“Reckon I’ll have a drink out of Abner Jones’ sacred bottle—th’ square one,” he said, and his grin grew at the bartender’s reluctance to fill the order. “If Ab don’t like folks drinkin’ that liquor you tell him to buy you out an’ *own* it hisself. Mebby he’d better buy you out an’ take it home with him.”

“Me tell him that?” exclaimed the bartender, his eyebrows going up swiftly. “That’s somethin’ you’d better tell him yore-self. Abner is one bad hombre! Every way you take him.”

“I’ve met bad hombres before an’ I’m not any parson myself,” retorted the sheriff. “I’ll tell him that when an’ if I should.” He glanced quickly at the square bottle in his companion’s hand. It was almost empty. He picked up the glass, took the bottle, poured, and passed the glass slowly back and forth under his nose. He tipped it and watched the oily liquor cling to the sides of the glass. Then he sipped it slowly.

"This shore is fine whisky, but a good bourbon suits me better. I reckon that's because I'm used to it. I'm only drinkin' this because it's sacred to Whiskers an' I don't like him worth a damn. Here's how."

The bartender put the bottle away but did not straighten up at once. From the little closet under the bar there came the sounds of clicking glass as bottles were being moved about, and then a low oath sounded. The man behind the counter slowly stood erect, and his expression was a scowl.

"That's th' last bottle," he growled. "I should have kept better track of it. Abner shore will give me hell." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Well, a new case should be here in a few days or a week. Mebby Abner can bring in a couple of bottles from his shack."

"*One* case?" laughed the sheriff with derision. "*One?*"

"One is plenty till it's near empty, ain't it?" snapped the bartender. "There's only one man drinkin' it, an' he don't come in to town very often."

"From now on there'll be two men drinkin' it, as long as I stay here, retorted the sheriff. "You better send off for an extry case, an' send for it right pronto." He laughed suddenly, his gaze on the dining-room door. "How soon do we eat?"

The bartender glanced at the clock.

"About fifteen minutes. You gettin' hungry?"

I can eat a hoss, 'though I'd rather not," answered the sheriff, turning toward the stairs. "I'm goin' up to my room for a min."

Stepping into his room, he closed the door behind him, put his back against it, and felt in a pocket. Out came the buckskin sack, and from it came the big yellow back. Another pocket produced the penciled notations. A moment's scrutiny sufficed to answer another of his questions: the number on this bill identified it as being part of the loot of that train robbery. To make certain of this he compared the numbers again. One of the stolen bills had been paid to Len Danvers for cattle only the fall before. The bill and the piece of paper both went into the buckskin sack, and he pocketed it as he moved toward the washstand. After a few moments he was ready to eat and he started for the stairs on his way to the dining room. Huh. Ben Peterson had seen two five-hundred-dollar bills last fall. There had been four men in the party of cattle buyers, and none of them wore whiskers. Two of the Jones brothers wore soft beards, and two of the Jones brothers had worn whiskers when they first came to this part of the country. Little things, if they chance to fall in the right positions, can make patterns.

The smoked beef tongue, the fresh, juicy beet greens, and the rest of the meal added up to enough to make a man at peace with the world, and that was about the way Hopalong felt as he left the dining room and sought a chair in the combination office and bar. The chair he chose was in a rear corner, which put the whole of the room before him and neither doors nor windows behind him. After all, he had been asking questions and showing considerable interest in affairs around town. He blew out his breath, tipped back against the wall, folded his arms across his stuffed stomach, and relaxed, idly watching the other diners leave the dining room.

The job he had set himself to do drifted through his mind, but it now drifted vaguely and gently and did not receive much attention at the moment. A stomach full to repletion is



not conducive to clear, keen thought. The barber might prove to be a gold mine and should be cultivated. His shop was a veritable clearinghouse of news and idle gossip, and he knew that all gossip is not idle.

The storekeeper knew things he was not telling. And there were the ranches of the numerous brothers Jones. And there was Len Danvers, of the LD, and friend of cagey Ben Peterson. According to the telegram only two of the stolen bills had not turned up, and now one of them had turned up right here in Hancock. He nodded, caught himself, and straightened up a little. He surely had eaten too much. ... He jerked his head up and realized that he had dozed off. Sighing, he leaned forward until the front legs of his chair struck the floor and then he lazily stood up. There was a broad grin on the bartender's face, and the sheriff grinned sheepishly in reply to it.

"How was th' supper?" asked the barman, and grinned even more.

"Too good an' too much of it," answered Hopalong. "I got to get out in th' open air and stretch my laigs an' see if I can't walk some of this fullness off me, 'though I shore don't like walkin' very much. It's too early to go to bed, an' I got to wake up. Any chance of my card-playin' friends ridin' in tonight?"

"Don't know," answered the bartender. "There's alius somebody droppin' in, an' mebbly enough of 'em to make up a game, 'though I can't name none of 'em until they do come in. Th' poker fambly won't be in till Satidy night. If nobody shows up me an' you can play some Californy Jack."

"All right," grunted Hopalong, and slowly moved toward the little twin doors. As they swung shut behind him he stopped

and thought of his horse. Turning, he re-entered the room and went out through the rear door. As he passed the corral the stableman came out of the office and paused.

"Same feed?" asked the latter.

Yeah, mostly hay," answered the sheriff. He was about to walk away when he saw the second chair inside the big door.

When the stableman returned, whistling inadequately because of two missing teeth, he found that he had company and he grinned cheerfully as he dropped onto his own chair.

"That's shore a right fine hoss you got," he said, reaching for an odorous corncob pipe.

"Never owned a better," replied the sheriff. "An' that reminds me: I've changed my mind. Give him a good feed of corn in th' mornin', an' th' earlier th' better. I may do considerable ridin'." He stretched out his legs and became acutely aware of the pipe. Corncobs are sweet and all right if they are thrown away soon enough. "This is goin' to be a cool night," he said, reaching for tobacco sack and papers.

"Yeah. We got plenty of altitude here," replied the stableman. "We must be up a mile. You buyin' cattle?" He packed the ashes firmly down and spat out a gratuitous contribution of the stem.

"Well," replied Hopalong, "right now I ain't. I figger to look 'em over for next year."

"Don't reckon you'll find very many."

"Well, mebbly not; if I want any they'll be beef cattle, four-year-olds an' older," explained the sheriff.

"You might pick up a few of that kind," admitted the stableman. "Th' Jones boys oughta have quite a number of that kind, come spring, less'n they make their own drives ag'in."

"They been drivin' beef critters?" asked Hopalong. The barber had told him that they hadn't driven any.

"Not till last year," answered the stableman. "They did drive some beef down th' trail last summer."

"Which way did they drive? Which trails?"

"South an' east to th' railroad at Little River. Why I heard Tim Thompson say, when he was drunk, that they had—*gosh!*

I had no idear it was so cold. *Too* cold to be settin' out here. Damn if I ain't chilled." He suddenly stood up. "Reckon I'll go in th' office, where it's warmer, an' make up my accounts. See you tomorrow, I reckon. Good night."

"I reckon so," replied the sheriff, slowly getting to his feet. He had not noticed that the temperature had become uncomfortable. He pulled the Stetson back on his head and watched the stableman enter the office and light the lamp, and then he walked slowly along the north side of the hotel and stepped onto the board sidewalk.

There were lights in the general store, the harness shop, two saloons farther up the street, and also in the office of a building on a cross street perhaps fifty yards from the main street. He walked up the latter and then along the side street to satisfy idle curiosity in regard to this building, because not only did it have lighted lamps in its office, but also a lighted lantern set on the top of a pole at the outer edge of the sidewalk. A faded sign in big letters ran across the whole front of the building: HANCOCK STAGE & LIVERY. He

kept on walking, turned left to strike across lots, and returned to the hotel on a roundabout course. By this time the drowsy effects of the big meal had worn off, and now he pushed between the swinging doors and returned to his pet chair in the corner.

“Feel better now?” asked the bartender with a polite interest.

“Yeah,” grunted Hopalong, and tossed his hat on the nearest table. “I reckon I’m wide-awake enough to play some friendly poker if any of th’ boys drop in.” While walking, a new idea had come into his mind. “That farm out back must keep Sam Jones busy with all that hoein’, milkin’, an’ feedin’. Who looks after it for him when he’s away?”

“He don’t go away,” answered the bartender, polishing a glass.

“That so?”

“He ain’t been away a day in th’ last three, four years,” replied the bartender. “I know, because he brings our supplies th’ first thing in th’ mornin’ an’ he ain’t missed a day in all that time.” None of the boys dropped in, and the sheriff and the bartender played a few hands of California Jack but gave up the game because of constant interruptions. Hopalong listened to the desultory conversations at the bar and learned nothing of interest. So Sam Jones had not missed a day. Then Sam had not been at the scene of the train robbery, not even along the right of way, not even to hold the horses. The evening passed slowly, and then he had a good-night drink with the bartender after the room was closed for the night and went up to his room to sleep soundly.

# 16

THE BARBER was honing a razor, when the sheriff entered the shop, and looked up with a smile.

"Did you bring yore razor?" he asked.

Hopalong put a hand into a pocket, brought it out with the article in question, and handed it over. The barber drew the edge across a thumbnail, frowned a little, and placed it on the shelf.

The sheriff was already in the chair.

"Shave an' a haircut," he grunted, closing his eyes and relaxing. Then he opened them and looked at the barber. "I was just wonderin' if there's any chance to sell graded bulls up here. They make a big difference in th' weight of beef critters." He closed his eyes again. "Say, Aberdeen Angus or Shorthorns."

"Why," replied the barber thoughtfully, "I don't know. I ain't heard anybody talk about breedin' from graded bulls. Most of th' ranchers hereabouts might not be able to buy 'em. They come purty high, don't they?"

"Not so high," answered the sheriff. "I could deliver Durhams for about sixty dollars a head an' Aberdeen Angus or Shorthorns for a few dollars more. They're th' best investment, considerin' th' outlay, that a ranchman can make."

"Uh-huh," said the barber. He worked for a moment in silence. "I reckon about th' only ranchers up here that could

buy enough graded bulls to make it worth yore while to drive 'em here would be th' Joneses."

"Reckon I'll have to pay them boys a visit an' find out how they feel about it."

"I don't know how they'll feel about buyin' th' bulls," said the barber after a moment's thought, "but I shore do know how they'll feel about you visitin' 'em. They *don't* want visitors."

"Huh," grunted the man in the chair. After a moment he spoke again. "Did th' Joneses have many cattle before they started buyin' last fall?"

"Don't know. I'd guess they didn't."

"I was told they made some beef drives late last fall," said the sheriff carelessly. "An' somebody told me they didn't buy beef critters then. Only cows, yearlin's an' some two-year-olds."

The barber made no comment.

"If they did make a drive, which way would they go?" continued the sheriff.

"Along th' stage route through Little River."

"South?"

"Southeast, in between Jim Glass an' Len Danvers," said the barber.

Hopalong grunted and leaned his head forward as the barber went to work on the back of his head.

"There are three roads," said the barber, busily snipping, "but th' stage road runs south of town, crosses Two Butte Creek, an' then swings off southeast an' passes Jim Glass' shack three, four miles east of it."

"Goes right through his range, huh?"

"Yeah."

Hopalong was silent. If a trail herd was driven across a man's range then that man would not only know it but would ride with it to turn back his own cattle that would be tempted to join the herd. He might even demand that the herd, when it had passed his range, be thrown up and trimmed.

"How far from town is th' Glass ranch?"

"Ten, twelve miles," answered the barber, removing the cloth and shaking it out. He replaced it and stepped to the shelf for the brush. "About a mile after you cross Two Butte Creek you'll come to a fork in th' trail. Foller th' right hand trail to th' next creek an' then foller a faint trail along th' creek. It'll take you right to Jim's door."

"Uh-huh," grunted the man in the chair. "I didn't say I wanted to know how to get to his ranch but I might be able to sell him a graded bull or two. Who buys th' hides up in this country?" "Pete Jameson, down in Little River."

"Little River in this county?"

"No. It's in Powers County."

"Little River th' county seat?"

"Yeah. Bend yore head forward a little more."

"Is it on th' railroad?" asked the sheriff.

"No," answered the barber. "It's a Wells, Fargo town. Th' railroad's fifty miles or more to th' south." His hands ceased to move. "Yo're askin' a lot of questions."

"Yeah. I may be drivin' some graded bulls up here," explained the sheriff. "If a trail herd went over that route then there must be good grass an' water along it. It's alius well to know about things like that."

"Oh shore," replied the barber, his curiosity now satisfied. "You like th' Aberdeen Angus better than th' Shorthorns?" "Either one is mighty good," answered the sheriff. "You take them polled, black Aberdeen Angus an' you got heavy beef. I figger th' Shorthorns mebbly get along better in all kinds of climates an' conditions, but if you breed from a cross of both of 'em you'll have th' best cattle in th' country."

The chair was tipped back, and again Hopalong closed his eyes and relaxed. He believed that he had asked enough questions for one day. He hardly heard what the barber was saying during the shave and when it was finished and the chair tipped forward again he opened his eyes, yawned, and grunted.

"There you are," said the barber, whisking away the cloth.

"A-w-w-w," yawned the sheriff, slowly getting out of the chair and putting a hand in a pocket. "How much?"

"Six bits. I'll have yore razor ready for you tomorrow."

"Take yore time with it," replied Hopalong, smiling. "I ain't figgerin' on shavin' myself as long as I am in town. See you tomorrow then."



Hopalong walked down the street and left the sidewalk to cut across the vacant lot toward the stable. The stableman, leaning back in his chair against the side of the building, looked up inquiringly.

“Reckon I’ll take a ride,” said the sheriff, dropping onto the next chair.

“All right,” said the stableman, getting up and walking into the building. In a few minutes he was back again, leading the saddled horse.

The sheriff swung into the saddle and headed for the main street. He followed it south, crossed Two Butte Creek, came to the forks, and not long thereafter he was riding along the faint trail leading to the JG. As he came within sight of the little shack he saw a man working near a wagon, and there were three small barrels on the ground near him. Four quarters of a slaughtered beef were in the wagon, and the hide was draining on the corral fence. Several sacks of rock salt leaned against the barrels.

Hopalong drew up and stopped at a reasonable distance from the busy operation, not wanting to stir up any dust too near the wagon. As he swung down from the saddle the rancher straightened up and withdrew his hands and arms from the barrel.

“Howdy, Glass,” said the sheriff, walking slowly forward.

“Howdy, stranger—oh, it’s th’ newest member of th’ Jones fambly,” said the ranchman with a grin. “You come down to try to buy a couple head of cattle from me at that fool trail margin?”

“No,” answered Hopalong with a laugh. “I come down thinkin’ mebby I could sell you some an’ also to pass th’

time. A feller gets lonesome in town. You ridin' in tonight to set in a game?"

"Yeah, I reckon so," answered Glass, "if I get this job done in time. This fool steer had to step in a hole an' bust it's laig. Lucky I found him. After I shot him I turned my hand to butcherin'. Lucky for me it was a steer an' not a cow. I don't think a hell of a lot of cow beef. When I get through I'll have me a supply of corned meat that'll help a lot during th' winter."

"Lemme give you a hand," offered the sheriff, taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves. "You dry- or wet-packin'?"

"Mostly wet," answered the ranchman with a grin. "I alius had th' idear that if you packed her wet there wouldn't be quite so much juice drawed out of th' meat." He picked up a salt sack and poured some of its contents into the barrel. "This rock salt is just about th' size I like it." Again he leaned over, and his hands and arms went into the barrel to spread the layer of salt properly.

"You use any saltpeter?" asked Hopalong, stepping up to the end of the wagon. "How thin you cuttin' this meat? What size hunks?"

"I don't like saltpeter," answered the ranchman. "I don't care about th' color of my meat an' I'd rather not take a chance of makin' it too damn hard. Why, about *so* big," he said placing his hands far enough apart to answer the question. "Yo're goin' to get yoreself all greased up."

"Won't be th' first time," laughed Hopalong, carefully cutting. "Soap an' hot water'll take it off." He was about to make another stroke but held his hand. "You puttin' th' tenderloin into pickle?"

"Hell, no!" exclaimed Glass. "Cut it out an' lay it aside. I'm goin' to smoke that," he explained, and glanced behind him where a small board edifice stood off by itself, a faint aura of smoke over it. "What you mean, tryin' to sell me some cattle?" he asked as he walked over to the wagon to get meat for another layer.

"Graded bulls," answered Hopalong. "They're th' best investment you can make."

"There's a bottle in th' house," said the rancher. "Let's go look for it an' set down for awhile. I ain't used to stoopin' over so much."

"Let's get this job done first," replied Hopalong with a grin and began cutting again. "Here's some tenderloin."

"Put it aside," replied Glass, back at the barrel and bending over again. "Well, that's half full," he grunted, and picked up the salt bag.

With two at work it did not take long to pack in the top layer and more salt. In a moment Glass had the head in place and was driving down the hoops.

"Reckon that's as tight as I can make it," said the rancher and tipped the barrel over, rolling it until the bung hole faced the sky. Knocking out the bung, he peered into the hole. "She's packed tight as hell." He reached behind him, picked up a water bucket, and began to-pour slowly, a little-at a time. Finally, satisfied that the barrel would hold no more water, he drove the bung home with the tap of an ax, stood up, and grinned.

"I hate to lose a three-year-old steer, but Jim Glass shore will be livin' off more'n ham an' bacon *this* winter."

Time passed swiftly, and the rest of the job was quickly done.

When the bung of the last barrel had been driven home Glass slowly stood erect, eased his back, and grinned again.

"Thanks, Jones," he said with a broad, friendly smile on his face. "Don't bother. I'll roll 'em in later. Where's them tenderloins? It won't take long to hang 'em up. I got a good smoke already goin'."

He made his words good and then, closing and fastening the smokehouse door, he led the way into the shack, washed his hands side by side with his companion, and then found the bottle and waved his visitor to a chair. As he pulled the cork he was smiling. "Next time I go to town in th' wagon I'll take in a nice, two-hundred-pound barrel of that meat an' do some dickerin' with th' storekeeper for flour, bakin' powder, beans, an' bacon. I ought to be full cocked an' ready to go this winter." Hopalong nodded, poured his drink, and saluted.

"Good health," he said.

"Same to you," replied Glass and placed the bottle on the table. "Yo're just wastin' yore time tryin' to sell me any graded bulls," he said, drawing a hand across his lips. "I've got all I can do to keep in flour an' bacon."

"Well, then there's no use talkin' to you about it," said Hopalong, reaching for tobacco and papers. "I just thought I'd use up some of my idle time by ridin' 'round an' see if I couldn't make up a small herd of graded bulls for this section of th' country. You reckon any of yore friends would be interested?" "Don't figger so, but they'll mebbly all be in town tonight an' they can speak for themselves."

"I follered a well-used trail on part of my way down here," said the sheriff. "I've been told it's th' stage road to Little River. Been any beef drives down it lately?"

"Not lately, but th' Jones boys threw a herd together last summer an' drove down it. I rode along with it till after it got past my range," said the ranchman.

"Big herd?"

"Big herd for this part of th' country. Between three an' four hundred head," answered Glass.

"You said last fall?" asked Hopalong.

"Last summer—midsummer."

"Bein' a herd from them Jones ranches, I reckon there was a lot of brands in it," suggested the sheriff.

"Yeah," answered Glass, a peculiar expression on his face. "Abner Jones was sore as hell because I wanted to ride with 'em, but I told him that I'd either ride with it across my range to see that none of my cattle joined it or they'd have to throw it up for a cut th' next day."

"Mixed herd?" asked the sheriff.

"No," answered the ranchman, "I'd say every critter was at least four year old."

"But I understand that last summer they didn't have enough cattle between 'em to make up a herd of growed beef as big as that," protested the sheriff.

"It struck me as bein' a mite peculiar," admitted the ranchman, "but there it was."

“Did anybody try to buy cows an’ heifers from you last fall?”

“Yes. I sold off a few head so I could buy grub.”

“Who were they?” persisted Hopalong.

Glass looked away uneasily.

“I don’t know,” he answered.

“Same bunch that bought from Ben Peterson an’ Len Danvers?”

“I don’t know who bought from Peterson an’ Danvers.”

“Does Ben Peterson know who bought his?” asked the sheriff after a short pause.

“Better ask Ben,” suggested Glass uneasily. “I ain’t seen Ben but a couple of times since last fall. How come yo’re so damn interested?”

“My fool curiosity, I reckon,” answered Hopalong with a laugh. “Anythin’ that has to do with trail herds an’ local range conditions interests me. If somebody up here is makin’ drives there won’t be no reason for me to come up here to do th’ same thing.”

Glass was looking at him curiously.

“Reckon that’s true enough,” he said, “specially if you stick to such a fool trail margin.”

“Hide buyer been through here lately?” asked Hopalong carelessly.

“No. He’ll not get up here till later on.”

"Why is Ben Peterson afraid of th' Joneses?" suddenly asked the sheriff. "An' why are you an' all th' rest of you?"

"I ain't afraid of no man wearin' pants!" retorted Glass, but he looked away again.

"Glad to learn that," grunted Hopalong, getting to his feet. "Well, if I can't sell you some graded bulls I might as well go back to town. I'll see you tonight if you ride in. So long."

"So long, an' thanks for helpin' me with that pack," responded the ranchman, following his guest toward the door, and he stopped in it and leaned against the casing, watching his visitor ride away.

Hopalong had considerable to think about on his way back to town. He disliked making another long horseback ride, but the hide buyer would have to be interviewed. Then he smiled as a thought struck him: he could make the trip on the stage if he wanted to.

# 17

THE BARTENDER looked up as the nearing steps sounded on the sidewalk outside. The doors swung back, and the Plumb Creek rancher pushed between them and strode into the room.

"Howdy, Robbins," grunted the man with the bar cloth. "Yo're right early."

"Howdy, Sam," replied the newcomer, his gaze on the man in a corner at the rear of the room. "Howdy, stranger. Back ag'in, huh?"

Hopalong stretched, nodded, and smiled.

"Yeah. Come back for th' good eatin' an' for some easy money." He chuckled. "You reckon th' rest of th' boys will be in tonight?"

"Reckon so," answered Robbins. "Have a drink?"

The sheriff very nicely could have done without one, but he had no wish to offend the ranchman. He loafed up to the bar, took the bottle, and poured the liquor scantily into the glass. He bought the second round, again pouring scantily, and then led the way to a table.

"You still holdin' to that trail margin?" asked Robbins, without any particular interest.

"Right now I am," answered Hopalong with a broad smile, "but if I come up here next year an' really want to make up a trail herd you'll find th' margin about right. You don't want to



buy any graded bulls an' improve th' weight an' quality of yore cattle, do you?"

"They cost too much an' they don't work out so good on an unfenced range," answered the ranchman. "There are too many scrub bulls runnin' around."

They heard a horse come down the street and then stop out front. In a few moments Jordan, of the FXJ, stepped into the room, nodded to Sam, and headed for the couple in the rear.

"How's th' trail-herd business?" he asked with a grin.  
"Howdy, Jordan."

"Plumb dead till next year," answered the sheriff. "You bring some loose change with you?"

"Yeah, an' I aim to add to it," chuckled Jordan. He glanced toward the bar. "What'll you have?"

"Reckon I'll wait a bit," replied Robbins. "We've just had two apiece. Get one for yoreself."

"Same goes for me," said the sheriff. "Have what you want. We'll drink later. Rest of th' boys ridin' in tonight? I figger Glass will be in. He put about six hundred pounds of steer meat into pickle today."

"That's good," said Jordan. "Yeah, I reckon they'll be in." He raised his voice. "Hi, Sam! Bring me a drink of that scotch, will you?"

"Ain't none left," answered Sam. "You want corn or rye?"

"None left? What'll Abner say to that? All right, make it corn."

"That damn bully will have plenty to say," growled the bartender. "His disposition is mean enough, ordinary, but when he's riled he's like a damn rattler. I figger I'll get hell with no holds barred." He approached the table, placed the drink before the Butte Creek ranchman, picked up the coin, and scowled at Hopalong. "Lenin' you have all that scotch has shore put me in a hole," he growled. "I shouldn't have done it."

"In a hole, huh?" gently inquired the sheriff, his eyes narrowing. "Well, if th' hole gets too deep I'll pull you out damn quick. Didn't I have to threaten you with a gun to get that liquor?"

Sam grinned dubiously and scratched a cheek. He glanced at a window and decided that it was time to light the lamps, although it would not be dark outside for an hour or more.

"Can't say I saw you pull no gun on me," he replied, "but I did feel that my life was plumb in danger." He chuckled and turned away, taking a match from a pocket and reaching for a wall lamp.

The sheriff studied the back of the departing bartender and then slowly looked at the faces of his companions, and he saw no smiles. He stirred in his chair.

"You reckon Sam will really get into trouble about that scotch?" he slowly asked. "Real trouble?"

Jordan looked steadily at him but said nothing. Robbins, however, nodded, and there was a frown on his face.

"Mebby," he admitted. "It all depends on how Abner feels at the moment. He holds a heavy hand on th' reins. Well," he said hopefully, "mebby he won't ride in tonight."

"No?" said Hopalong, sighing gently. "It won't be dark for more'n an hour. Oh well, now I got to figger on stayin' here for a few days, just in case he does ride in." He looked toward the front of the room, where the little doors were swinging inward to reveal the presence of Bud Wilson of Horse Creek. The newcomer waved toward the bar, saw no one stirring at the table, and grinned as he put a foot on the rail.

"They just had theirs," explained the bartender, reaching toward the back bar.

"In that case," said Bud with a wide grin, "make mine scotch."

"It's all gone," said Sam and slid a round bottle across the bar.

"Too bad," grunted Bud, pouring. A moment later he clacked across the floor, pulled back a chair at the table, and dropped onto it. "What's th' matter with you hombres? You all took th' pledge?"

"Only a thirsty animal drinks," grunted Jordan and looked curiously at Hopalong. "You told us yore name, stranger, but damn if my mem'ry ain't tricked me ag'in."

"Jones," chuckled Hopalong. "Fred Jones. You savvy, just one of th' Jones fambly."

"Damn if they ain't named this town wrong," said Robbins. "There ain't a Hancock in it. They should have called it Jones-ville, Jonestown, or Jones-somethin'. We shore got our share of 'em. I might go so far as to say that we got too damn many of 'em." The slight frown slowly faded, and he looked apologetically at the member of that family now present. "Not meanin' you," he explained.

“Yeah. We shore could do right well without some of ‘em, specially that damn Abner,” said Wilson quickly, perhaps too quickly. “Where in hell does he go all th’ time? He don’t stay around here long enough to get set.”

“Mebby he’s like me,” suggested the sheriff. “Mebby he’s got th’ saddle itch.”

“What you figger?” asked Robbins, looking at Wilson. “When a man ain’t got no home but lives with his brothers on their ranches—a day or two here, a day or two there—hell, I reckon he puts in a lot of time around this section that we don’t know about.” He turned to Jordan. “Anythin’ excitin’ happen over yore way since we seen you last?”

Jordan stroked his chin and appeared to be thinking. He squirmed on the chair and then pushed up to a more erect position, and two deep lines suddenly showed on his forehead.

“I dunnohe muttered. “I dunno.” He paused for a moment. “There ain’t no tellin’ what cow critters will do, but there was a small bunch that liked to hang out five, six miles up th’ creek. Last two times I was up that way I didn’t see em. Th second time I done some ridin’ around, but they wasn’t nowhere in sight. Reckon, mebbby they just drifted on to better feed.

“Feed up there all grazed off?” idly asked Hopalong, studying his left-hand thumb.

“N-o,” slowly answered Jordan. “Not too much.”

“I’ll keep an eye open for ‘em,” said Robbins, in case they drifted over my way.”

"I've forgot what yore brand is," said Hopalong to Jordan.  
"FXJ. Why?" asked the ranchman.

Hopalong did not answer at once. He leaned back in his chair and allowed the old parade of brands to pass in review before his mind's eye. At last he looked at Jordan and smiled faintly.

"You'll find 'em somewhere," he said. "They ain't gone for good—they're just temporary misplaced." He chuckled.  
"Cattle get notions sometimes. What you say we have a game? Four hand ain't as good as five, but it s better than not playin a-tall. Say, Wilson, you want to buy some graded bulls an' build up th' quality of yore herd?"

Wilson shook his head slowly.

"No. Not this year," he answered.

"All right," replied Hopalong. "Same stakes as last time?" he asked, looking around the table.

Jordan scaled his big hat onto a chair against the wall and slowly shook his head.

"There'll be somebody driftin' in purty soon," he said. "Let's wait a while." He glanced at Hopalong. "You sellin' graded bulls?"

"If I could make up a fair-sized herd to drive up here I would," he answered.

As they spoke they heard sounds of a horse coming down the street and they smiled at each other. Other hats now scaled onto other chairs, and as Jordan got up to go to the bar for cards and chips the others drew closer to the table.

# 18 .

THE LITTLE DOORS swung inward again, and Abner Jones, well covered with dust, pushed into sight and headed for the bar. Hopalong slowly arose and loafed toward the counter to get a cigar. Those remaining at the table tensed slightly.

"Gimme a deck an' th' chips," said Jordan, leaning against the bar.

"Give me a drink," said Abner, hooking a heel on the rail.

"There's yore deck an' chips," said Sam, pushing a cigar box toward Jordan. He reached behind him and picked a round bottle and a glass from the back bar. "An' there's yore drink," he said to Abner, sliding both toward him.

"I'll have a cigar," said Hopalong, ignoring the footrail but leaning comfortably against the bar, one elbow on it. He was facing Abner.

"An' there's yore cigar," said Sam, a curious expression on his face.

"You made a mistake," growled Abner, pushing the bottle from him. "I want my own brand. This stuff ain't fit for a dog to drink!"

"Ain't none of yourn left," said Sam, reaching under the counter and showing an empty, square bottle. "There're all of 'em as empty as that."

"What do you mean?" demanded Abner. "Last time I was in here that bottle was near full!"

"Well, it ain't full now," replied Sam uneasily. "A new case oughta be here on th' next stage. That'll only be a few days."

"What good does that do me now?" demanded Abner, color creeping into his ears. "What you done with my scotch?"

"Some of th' boys called for it an' drank it," answered Sam.

"Why,--you!" roared Abner, glaring at the bartender.

"What you mean sellin' my liquor to any--that asks for it?"

"It wasn't yore liquor," retorted Sam, his neck getting red. "You hadn't bought it an' laid it away. Yo're not my only customer, an--"

"By Gawd, I'll take you apart!" shouted Abner, starting for the end of the bar, but it happened that he chose to take the wrong direction.

"I'm th'--that drank yore liquor," said Hopalong evenly, now standing squarely in the other's way. "I bought it an' I drank it, an' Sam couldn't do nothin' about it. An' I'm goin' to have my fair share out of th' next case, me an' my friends. An' if you take anybody apart it'll be me an' not Sam."

Abner stopped for a moment, caught flat-footed by surprise. His whiskers seemed to bristle as he thrust out his jaw. The two men were not more than a yard apart, too close for an unhampered draw, and Abner stepped backward for more clearance, and his hand flashed downward; but as he stepped back Hopalong stepped forward and stabbed out his right hand to the left wrist of the other, holding the gun tightly in its holster. Hopalong's left curved over and a little to one side of the middle of the whiskers, and there was full weight and power behind it, the weight of an arched back

and thrusting legs. Abner went backward to the left, struck the bar, slid down it, and rolled off the footrail.

Hopalong moved swiftly again, bending forward, and the sheathed gun of the fallen man yielded to his grasp. Half cocking it, the sheriff punched out the cartridges, dropped them into a pocket, and then placed the harmless weapon on the bar. Then he stepped back two paces and waited. The sudden gasps from the rear of the room became low mutters of pleasure, and Sam remembered about then to close his mouth.

"It warn't no shootin' matter," said the sheriff quietly, casually watching the man on the floor. Minutes seemed to drag along, although they really were seconds. Sam put his hand under the bar, took hold of something, changed his mind, and brought the hand into sight again. He glanced from the prostrate man to Hopalong, and a slow, admiring grin crept over his face.

"Like th' kick of a mule," he muttered, and looked back to the floor, leaning far over the bar to see what was happening.

Abner stirred, subsided, and then stirred again. He drew up a leg and rolled over on one side. Then his eyes opened, and an elbow stiffened against the floor. Hopalong took another backward step, his eyes coldly on the other man. Abner blinked, looked around, and then focused on Hopalong. He was alert now, waiting for his enemy's heels on face and stomach, brutal touches of the rough-and-tumble fighting of the long frontier. After a moment he sensed that there would be no heels and he rolled over to hands and knees and slowly, steadily pushed against the floor. On his feet again, he grasped the edge of the bar, where he rocked gently until his senses fully returned.



"It warn't no shootin' matter *then*" said Hopalong slowly and calmly. "I wouldn't advise you to make it one now or later."

Abner grabbed the gun from the bar and tried a snap shot at the man who had knocked him down and out and cursed viciously at the useless click of the hammer.

"Put it away an' get out after you've had yore drink," said the sheriff. "I've said twice that it warn't no shootin' matter, but if you reckon different come back later, an' we'll make it one. You may have this range buffaloed, but I'm ready for a showdown. Have yore drink an' get out."

"No shootin' matter, huh?" replied Abner, cursing. He jammed the empty gun into its sheath. He unbuckled the belt and tossed the whole rig on the counter. "It takes more'n a lucky, surprise blow to stop me, you--! You got a lickin' comin' ' to you if you've got th' guts to take off yore belts. An' you'll get another lickin' every drink of my scotch you take!"

Hopalong was thinking quickly—to take off his belts and guns? Every waking moment for years he had worn them but he did not believe that anyone in Hancock or the ranges around it suspected his identity, and if he took them off it would not be for long. He glanced knowingly at Sam, stepped swiftly back and sideways, and found the bartender quickly meeting him. Sam grabbed the belts and placed them on the back bar, and once again his right hand slipped under the counter and remained there.

Abner rushed, swinging both hands but really wishing to get a wrestler's hold where his great strength could be used to its best advantage. There were no Marquis of Queensberry rules in that country at that time. Kneeing and gouging were all right, and no one would interfere until the fight was

finished. It was up to each man to protect himself from any kind of attack.

Instead of backing away, Hopalong sprang a surprise by stepping swiftly inside the swinging fists and driving left and right to the body. He was like a cat. The blows seemed to give Abner trouble in his breathing. He was rolled back off balance and as he recovered it he again rushed and lashed out with a left, which struck the sheriff on the cheek and opened the skin.

Hopalong slipped to the right and struck twice with his own left. The first blow missed, but the second landed on Abner's right eye. The effect seemed like the materialization of an oyster out of nowhere, and in a few moments the eye looked like one.

Abner brought up his knee viciously, but it only grazed the sheriff's outer thigh as Hopalong twisted sideways, and then both of Abner's hands flashed out for a grip. Hopalong drove him back on his heels again with two more hard lefts, and one of them got the same eye. Again Abner rushed, trying for a grip, and this time wrestling got into the fight. His left wrist was caught, and Hopalong swung quickly around, put his shoulder under the other's armpit, turned like a flash, straightened up with all the power of his body, and bent swiftly forward.

It was the old flying mare, and Abner left the floor and sailed through the air. Quickly as it had happened Abner saw where he was going and managed to get his right arm across his face to protect it and his eyes. The window sprang to meet him and then fairly exploded as the sailing man crashed through it. It was a six-foot drop to the ground at this place, and when Abner struck he rolled over twice and lay still.

Hopalong hardly checked the motion of the throw but turned it into a continuing motion toward the end of the bar and around it. Almost before anyone had recovered from his surprise he had one of his guns and had his back to the back bar. Breathing quickly, he waited.

“By Gawd, you’ve killed him!” shouted Jordan, half out of his chair.

“Hope so,” muttered Robbins.

“No such luck,” growled the bartender, letting loose of what he had been holding under the bar.

“You all saw it!” snapped Hopalong. “I didn’t figger on th’ window. Didn’t have time to, didn’t know where it was, but it was a fair an’ square fight. Any objections?”

“Put on yore belts,” said Robbins. “He got what he was itchin’ for—some wrastlin’. We got to go out an’ take a look at Abner. He’s likely dead.”

“Not that--I” said Jordan, a slow grin showing. “Man, I’ve seen a fight today! All right, let’s go look.”

They streamed out through the rear door into the deepening twilight, turned the corner of the building, and bent down over the man on the ground. Robbins removed his fingers from Abner’s wrist, the other hand from his chest. He nodded and straightened up.

“Tough as rawhide,” he muttered. “I thought shore he’d be killed.” He bent over again. “He shore is a gory mess. His skin must be full of glass.” He looked at the window frame around the prostrate man’s head and shoulders but did not appear to see it. “Tough as rawhide,” he repeated. “He should have been killed.”

"Any glass in his face, in his whiskers?" snapped the sheriff, a sudden thought popping into his mind. "Take a good look, *all* of you!"

The examination found some glass, a little blood, and curious faces turned to the sheriff, but he gave no explanation. He passed the back of his hand over the beard and stood up. It was coarse and stiff, almost like hog bristles.

"Well, I'm glad he wasn't killed," he growled. "I've said all along that it warn't no killin' matter but from now on I reckon mebbby it will be, when he gets so he can come to town." He looked up as a horse stopped beside him and saw Jim Glass leaning over the saddle and looking down.

"What th' hell hit Abner, an' who framed him?" demanded Glass with pardonable curiosity, a grin slipping over his face. "He ain't dead, is he?"

"By Gawd, he *is* framed!" shouted Jordan and let out a roar of laughter. "Look at that hunk of sash! All framed an' delivered!"

"From th' looks of that eye I'd say he was branded too," chuckled Robbins. "What a job, what a job! Well, it was man to man, rough-an'-tumble, an' there ain't no question, either, about th' rough or th' tumble. Abner shore was unlucky. Come on in. I'm buyin' th' drinks."

"But there warn't no windstorm or earthquake," said Glass. "How th' hell did he get like this, an' why th' frame around him?"

"Our friend, th' cattle buyer with th' big trail margin, just heaved Abner through that window," explained Jordan, pointing. "It is called th' flyin' mare an' it shore flew." The bartender was standing in the ruined window. "Hey, Sam,

get a bucket of water an' bring it out here," ordered Jordan. "This damn bully ain't comin' ' to fast enough to suit me."

The man in the window disappeared, and in a few moments Sam lugged a bucket of water around the corner of the building and heaved it precisely over Abner, who stirred, opened his eyes, groaned, and then sat up with the aid of Robbins. The dazed expression slowly cleared, and he looked at the sheriff. One shoulder seemed to be a little askew, and his left arm was peculiarly bent. His right hand slowly felt of his shoulder and his other arm. His forehead was white and beaded from pain. He set his teeth, holding back another groan. Sam reappeared, this time with a tumbler of whisky in his hand. Abner gulped it down, and a little color came into his face, where the beard did not hide it.

"Got some busted bones," he grunted. "Get me to th' doc." While three men carefully took hold of him he looked at Hopalong again, his eyes blazing with hatred.

"I'll be all right in a couple of months," he said between his teeth. "What I said about drinkin' my scotch still goes. Next time I'll break every damn bone in yore body if yo're here when I come back ag'in!"

Hopalong and Sam, the latter holding the reins of Glass's horse, watched the departing group.

Sam suddenly blew out his breath and looked at his companion.

"By Gawd, *that was a fight!*"

"An' there warn't no reason for it!" snapped the sheriff angrily. He looked behind him at the ruined window. "Get that fixed, an' I'll pay for it."

“Mr. Jones,” said the bartender, picking up the bucket in his free hand and turning toward the stable, “that’ll be on th’ house. It’s what you might call a pleasure an’ a privilege.” He saw the curious stableman approaching, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Turning the horse over to this tardy person, he waved toward the tie rail out front, ordered Abner’s horse taken to the stable, and then led his companion back to the hotel and into the barroom.

“This celebration rightly calls for scotch, but you meebby know by now that we ain’t got none,” said Sam with a grin. “Here’s to you, feller!” He downed the drink, choked with sudden laughter, and threw himself on the bar.

# 19

THE SATURDAY NIGHT crowd was coming in to town. The sounds of horses' hoofs, the squeak and rattle of an occasional wagon, hard heels hitting the board sidewalks, and a rising dust steadily increased. A horse stopped in front of the hotel, and a moment later heavy steps clacked across the walk, and Bud Wilson pushed the little doors apart and glanced about the room. Then he looked inquiringly at the two men at the bar.

"Their hosses are at th' rail, but where are they?" he asked, his eyes on the cut on the sheriff's face.

"Over to doc's," answered the bartender and quickly smiled as he shook his head. "There ain't none of 'em hurt. They just carried Abner Jones over there to have a busted collarbone an' a broken arm fixed up an' th' glass picked out of his damn hide." He waved a hand toward the broken window and began to laugh again. "Abner went right through it, an' it wasn't open."

"Good Gawd!" exclaimed Wilson, staring at the window. "I never heard of him gettin' as drunk as that! I've never even heard of him gettin' drunk a-tall. It don't sound reasonable."

"Abner wasn't drunk," replied the bartender, still laughing.

"He just went out of his way an' picked a fight with our friend here an' got throwed through it. Head first. You shoulda seen it."

"Wish I had!" replied Wilson, looking with friendly approval at the cattle buyer. "I didn't suppose there was anybody

hereabouts who could lick Abner. He's supposed to be a combination of pizen an' chain lightnin'. Too bad you didn't bust his damn neck." He looked at the bartender again. "What th' hell started it?"

"Scotch whisky," answered the bartender. "I've knowed a lot of fights to get goin' from too much whisky, but this un started because there wasn't no whisky a-tall." Sam laughed again. "Abner had to drink *our* kind of liquor or go without, an' he just blew up an' went on th' prod."

"Our liquor, huh? Too bad!" sneered Wilson as the bartender walked to the rear door and yelled for the stableman, telling him to bring boards, nails, and a hammer, and then hurriedly returned to the bar to wait on several men who had just come in. The story of Abner's defeat was too rich a morsel to be kept secret, and the bartender told his new customers about it. Laughter roared out loudly, and congratulations and drinks were in order.

The window was being boarded up when the three missing ranchmen returned, their faces wearing broad grins.

"Hello, Bud," said Jordan to Wilson, and then he looked at the bartender. "You was right to have Abner's hoss taken around back an' looked after. He won't be needin' it for quite a while. I never knowed such a damn fool or a man with more guts. He was hell-bent to ride home to one of th' ranches after th' doc got through with him, but th' doc gave him hell an' said for him to stay in town, an' in bed, at that. Doc's a mite worried about all them cuts. There was dirt an' cloth in some of 'em, an' some of 'em was right generous slashes. Mrs. Thompson is gettin' a room ready for th' cripple. We asked Doc if turpentine wouldn't be right good for 'em, an' he looked kinda funny an' said that th' stuff he



was goin' to use on 'em would be powerful enough to suit anybody. He was still pickin' out th' glass when we left."

"Yeah," said Robbins, still laughing. "An' you've no idear how much Abner loves them whiskers of his. Doc was goin' to send for th' barber to cut 'em off so he could look for cuts on Abner's face, but Abner plumb raised hell about that. He wouldn't even let th' doc touch 'em. It didn't look like his face was cut, but one ear was. An' you should see his right eye!"

Hopalong's expression did not change while he listened about Abner's love for his whiskers. He ordered a round of drinks and took a cigar for himself. After a few minutes he followed the ranchmen to the table in the rear of the room and sat down on his chair. Abner Jones's fierce affection for his whiskers was a matter of deep satisfaction to the sheriff. He watched Wilson shuffle the cards and deal and sat back as they fell before him. Picking them up and spreading them until the pips showed, he saw the bet and waited for his turn to come around again. The town was getting noisier. He heard horses stop at the tie rail and idly glanced at the swinging doors a moment later.

This time the maintenance of the sheriff's poker face was a real strain, for his curious glance at the front of the room showed him Mesquite Jenkins and, to his utter disbelief, Johnny Nelson. He let his gaze move around the room and return to Mesquite and his companion. There was no question about it: it was Johnny. He saw the raise, tossed in a red chip to raise again, and gave his full attention to the game, but his ears were alert.

The earlier customers at the bar had drifted out again, and the two newcomers had the long counter to themselves.

“Got a couple of rooms for th’ night?” asked Mesquite.

“Reckon so,” answered the bartender, picking up the iron bar and lustily banging the steel triangle, but he had little confidence in the sound reaching the ears of the stableman through the noise of a Saturday night. He put the rod down on the back bar and opened the account book. “Number two’s occupied. I can give you three and four. Th’ beds are comfortable an’ clean. If you’ll just sign yore names on th’ next two lines.” He pushed pen, ink, and book across the bar, then left the page open for the ink to dry and turned to light a lamp at the far end of the back bar. “All right,” he said, “if you’ll foller me.”

“What about our saddles an’ bedrolls?” asked Johnny, paying no attention to anything but the matter at hand.

“They’ll be brought in an’ carried upstairs, unless you’d as soon leave th’ saddles in th’ stable office,” answered the bartender, pausing in his progress toward the stairs. “They’ll be safe there. How long you figgerin’ to stay?”

“Don’t know,” answered Mesquite. “Leave th’ saddles at th’ stable but bring th’ rolls upstairs. Give our hosses a drink an’ a little hay.”

“Hell,” said Johnny. “Wait a minute. We’ll get th’ rolls ourselves. Come on, Kid. We ain’t cripples.”

The bartender placed the lamp on the far end of the bar and waited until the new guests returned with bedrolls and rifles and then led the way. The noise outside was still climbing. Bits of song and occasional yells broke through the general sound level.

Hopalong’s eyes were on the game, but his ears were not. He was tingling with pleasure. It was like going back into the

past and ripping out a precious page of action to have Johnny Nelson in the same town with him right now. There were half a dozen Joneses? To hell with them: there were three Bar 20 men on hand. He passed, threw in his hand, and leaned back to enjoy the fight between Glass and Jordan. The pot contained eighteen cents, but a man would have thought they were dollars. Between deals the talk invariably swung back to the fight, and there was plenty of laughter.

Heavy steps were sounding overhead, and Hopalong tried to locate them in relation to his own room. Yes. He remembered now. Number four was next to his room, and number three was across the narrow hall. The bartender came clomping down the stairs and headed purposefully for the rear door. His bellow could have been heard all over town, even in this noisy night, and the answering reply was almost as loud. Another hand had been played before the stableman passed through the room on his way to get the horses at the tie rail. He tried to bum a drink but was turned down flatly.

"Yore deal, Jones," said Robbins, pushing the deck and the discard across the table and pulling the chips to him. "This looks like my night to howl, th' way they're comin' '."

"We'll make you howl before it's over," laughed Glass.

The bartender stopped at the table, glancing from face to face.

"Suppose these two new fellers would like to set it? How about it?" he asked.

"Suits me," grunted Jordan, idly watching the cards as they fell.

"Me too,'" said Glass, rolling a cigarette. "There's alius room for more suckers. That's my motto."

"All right," said Robbins, glancing curiously at the sheriff.

Hopalong nodded carelessly, and the bartender went back to his bar. The noisy steps overhead now assumed a purposeful direction and soon clattered down the stairs. Johnny and Mesquite turned to their left and stopped at the bar.

"What'll it be, gents?" asked Sam, mopping the bar.

"Corn liquor for me," said Johnny. "We've rode a long way, an' I need it."

"Make mine a beer," said Mesquite, and once again the sheriff had trouble keeping his poker expression. Evidently things had happened to the Kid during his visit to Tex Ewalt. Up to now soda pop and sarsaparilla had been his drinks.

"There you are," said the bartender. "Th' dinin' room is closed for th' night, but if yo're hungry you can eat at Mike's, around th' corner to th' left on th' first side street. Now, lemme see, room, breakfast; stall, supper, an' breakfast." His lips moved while he figured, and then he stated the sums, made change, and pushed it across the bar.

"We ate supper before we hit town," said Mesquite. "Have another, Johnny?"

"Not right now, Kid," answered Johnny, and turned to look at the card game. "Anythin' to do in town before bedtime?"

'Th' boys in th' back will be glad to make room for you if you'd like to set in a game of draw poker," said the

bartender, nodding at the table. "It's just a little friendly game of penny ante," he explained.

Mesquite also had turned and was watching the game.

"All right. How about you, Johnny?" he asked and followed his friend and the bartender toward the rear of the room. The dealer kept on shuffling, his eyes on the approaching trio. The proper introductions made and acknowledged, the newcomers dragged chairs to the table, bought chips, and waited for the cards to stop falling. Hopalong renewed the struggle to keep his poker face: when he had last seen Mesquite that person's knowledge of cards went no farther than California Jack, and he did not particularly care for that. During the time of the Kid's visit Tex certainly had taught him some manly traits. Drinking beer and playing poker! He was curious to see what kind of a game the Kid played but he believed that with Tex as the teacher the game would be soundly based.

"Sorry we're makin' it seven-handed," said Mesquite, glancing around at the players. "There'll be quite some dealin' from th' discard. Are we playin' straights? All right, give me two cards."

"You boys aimin' to stay here very long?" asked Glass, tossing in his hand.

"Reckon not, though there ain't no real reason for us to get any saddle itch," answered Johnny. "If we like th' town—an' I reckon we will—we might hunt us up a job of punchin' hereabouts."

"There ain't much chance of that," said Jordan. "It's mostly little ranches, an' th' bigger ones ain't hirin'."

Hopalong laughed and patted his stomach.

“Wait till you sample th’ grub,” he said with a wide grin. “You’ll not be in any hurry to leave town.”

The game went on, and then came the final hand and the usual good nights. The three guests of the hotel went to the bar for the final rounds with the ranchers and then returned to the table, where they talked of ordinary and innocent subjects. There was still some noise outside when the bartender locked the front door, then the one in the rear, filled a water glass three quarters full of whisky, blew out most of the lamps, and made his weary way to join his guests at the table. After half an hour of idle talk they stood up and made their way toward the stairs, the bartender putting out the rest of the lamps as he followed them. He listened until he heard their footsteps overhead and then he poured more liquor into the glass and sought the nearest chair. Again it was Saturday night, and he sighed with pleasure and relief.

## 20

ON SUNDAY MORNINGS breakfast was an hour later than on weekdays, and Hopalong, at that, barely got through the doors in time. One glance told him that there were only two in the room beside himself, and as he looked at them and hesitated Johnny raised a hand invitingly.

“Why not eat with us an’ make it three-handed, Mr. Jones?” he suggested, and Mesquite nodded.

Hopalong walked slowly toward their table and pulled back a chair.

“I’d shore be glad to,” he said as he sat down. “You’ll find th’ food here about th’ best cow-country grub you ever tasted. I

reckon you've already ordered?"

"Yeah," answered Mesquite with a wide grin. "Ham an' aigs, buckwheat cakes with molasses, an' coffee. I'm a mite anxious about th' aigs."

"You needn't be," replied Hopalong. "Th' hens are out back that laid th' aigs yesterday. An' this is one place in th' great land of cows where you can get real cream, milk, an' real butter." He watched the cook place the orders of his companions before them and then gave his own.

"You said you was ridin' through unless you could get a job punchin' somewhere on th' range around th' town?" he said.

"Yeah," mumbled Johnny, his mouth full of ham and esss. "That's right."

"I don't believe you'll find any," replied the sheriff and then, hearing the cook busy in the kitchen, lowered his voice until his words could barely be heard. "We've got to talk things over without arousing any suspicions." Then he spoke in full, natural voice. "From what I've heard I don't believe that there' are any jobs around Hancock. Of course you can't be shore of that till you try."

"We don't need jobs—not for a while," said Johnny, his mouth again full. "By Gawd, these aigs are *aigs!*"

We got six months pay in our pockets an' no particular place to go to, explained Mesquite. He dropped his voice to a mutter. "Foller our lead out in th' barroom."

"You had any luck makin' up trail herds in this part of th' country?" politely asked Johnny, attacking the second piece of ham.

Hopalong laughed.

“No. Didn’t need any at this time of th’ year. My herds were all made up when I got here. I saved myself from buyin’ any by insistin’ on a four-dollar trail margin.”

Mesquite chuckled understandingly and cleaned the last of his eggs by scouring the plate with half a biscuit. Then he pulled toward him the stack of buckwheat cakes and the molasses pitcher. There was plenty of butter, and he used it all.

Hopalong heard the slow steps approaching from the kitchen and leaned back to give the cook a chance to place the dishes in front of him. With the exception of the eggs, his order was the same as his companions.

That was a nice bunch of fellers we played with last night,” said Johnny, reaching for the molasses. “I had a right good time an’ with this kind of grub I ain’t figgerin’ on leavin’ town in no hurry.”

“Th’ same reasons why I came back to Hancock,” admitted Hopalong. “You ought to see what’s out back of this place.”

“Yeah?” politely asked Johnny and then pushed a forkful of dripping pancakes into his mouth.

“You never saw such a garden,” enthused Hopalong. “An’ there’s a big chicken house an’ a barn full of milk cows.”

“We’ll have to take a look at it,” said Mesquite. “I reckon that this is mebbly th’ first time in years that I ate real butter.”

Little more was said, all being too busily engaged with the serious matters immediately before them, and in a few minutes Johnny and Mesquite pushed back their chairs,



grunted something, and headed for the door. Hopalong wiped the pleased smile from his face and helped himself to a little more molasses. It was not long before he, too, pushed away from the table and headed for the door and the barroom.

Sam was smiling at the two guests sitting near the wall, their chairs tipped back. He slowly, mechanically wiped the bar.

"You ain't tasted nothin' yet," he said. "Fricasseed chicken, dumplin's, mashed potatoes an' turnips, an' mebbly more. That'll be for dinner. I ain't had time to find out what we'll have for supper."

"I ain't in no hurry to pull stakes out of here," said Johnny, looking at his companion.

"Me, neither," grunted Mesquite, grinning widely. "You know, if we could get a job not too far from town—huh, what you reckon?"

"Shore," happily answered Johnny, rubbing his stomach, and then he closed his eyes. "If we could get jobs not *too* far from town." Then he suddenly dropped his chair back onto all four legs. "I ate too much. I'm goin' out an' walk around a little."

"Me, too, I reckon," grunted Mesquite.

The bartender laughed and looked knowingly at the cattle buyer who was leaning on the end of the bar.

"Sounds like a good idear," said Hopalong. "It wouldn't hurt me none if I did th' same."

“Take ‘em out an’ show ‘em th’ town,” suggested Sam with a chuckle. “Anyhow, you ought to work up an appetite for dinner.”

“What about that garden you was tellin’ us about at breakfast?” asked Johnny.

“All right,” reluctantly agreed Hopalong, pushing from the bar and leading the way to the rear door. “This way is th’ shortest.”

They looked at the garden, talked with the gardener, looked at the chickens and into the cow barn and then they wandered toward the main street, loafed along it, and a few minutes later sat down on the ground at the end of the street and grinned at each other.

“It’s mighty good to be with you ag’in, Hoppy,” said Johnny.

“That goes both ways,” replied the sheriff. “I thought you was down on th’ SV. How come you ain’t?” He listened to the explanation and nodded. “Buck an’ Rose will be mighty happy.”

“I reckon there’s somethin’ plumb wrong out here,” suggested Mesquite.

“I’m beginnin’ to figger so,” replied Hopalong.

“Deal us hands,” said Johnny eagerly.

“All right, but I ain’t got many cards. Then lissen,” said the sheriff, and for half an hour he spoke slowly, carefully, and in a low voice.

“We can skin some cattle an’ get a look at th’ underside,” suggested Johnny, inspired by the old Bar 20 spirit.

“Or one of us can ride over to Little River an’ do some diggin’ about th’ hides that was bought up in this part of th’ country,” suggested Mesquite. Then he shook his head. “Don’t know about that. Cattle thieves ain’t likely to sell hides with changed brands;—that is, brands that would show old an’ new scar tissue. An’ any man that bought such hides would keep his mouth shut.”

“All we’re goin’ on right now is suspicion,” reproved Hop-along, who felt the limiting responsibilities of being a law officer. “That don’t give us th’ right of goin’ ’round killin’ cattle, just to look at th’ underside of their skins. We got to have somethin’ purty certain before we can do that. There’s a harness maker here in town, but it’s likely he finds it cheaper an’ easier to buy his hides all dressed. Anyhow, he’d keep his mouth shut too.”

“Why don’t I go out an’ visit with Ben Peterson?” asked Johnny. “We know each other. Mebby he can remember things he *forgot* to tell you.”

“By gosh, I meant it when I said I’d et too much,” growled Mesquite. “All th’ meals as good as that?”

“All of ’em, an’ some a lot better,” answered the sheriff with a laugh.

“Looks like this feller Danvers ought to be talked with,” suggested Johnny. “After all, it looks like he’s th’ hombre that took th’ stolen bill. He is th’ hombre, if th’ storekeeper’s not lyin’. If he did take it, what’s his rights under th’ law?”

The sheriff carefully and at length explained the law in regard to accepting, owning, and passing stolen money, whereupon Johnny grinned and nodded.

"That's shore a square break," he commented. "What about Ben Peterson an' th' hard money he took, if it was stolen?"

"That's a hoss of a different color, but only in th' matter of identification," answered Hopalong. "All th' rest of it's th' same. Ben saw nothin' to identify that money. He didn't see any printin' on th' sack." He shifted position and recrossed his legs. "You leave Danvers an' Ben to me an' do a little ridin' around th' range north of here. I wouldn't ask for jobs unless we have to do that. Don't get too close to th' ranch houses." "We can rope an' hog-tie Abner Jones after he gets well, shave off them damn whiskers, an' see what's under 'em," offered Johnny, the old-time light in his eyes.

"I took an oath of office not only to execute th' law but to obey it," replied the sheriff reprovingly. "I can't do that or tell anybody else to do it."

"I ain't took no oath of office," retorted Johnny, his eyes glinting. "There was a time you'd 'a shaved th' whiskers off a whole damn fambly if you felt like it."

"I'm a deputy," grunted Mesquite, and then suddenly he looked at the sheriff. "But am I?"

"No. You was made a special deputy for th' last job we did," answered Hopalong. "You quit bein' a deputy when it was cleaned up, which it shore was."

"All right," said Mesquite with a grim smile. "We ain't officers an' we don't know you, except as a cattle buyer named Jones. You see Ben an' Danvers an' let us alone about th' time Abner gets so he can ride a hoss. Got anythin' else to tell us?" Hopalong shook his head, foreseeing complications in the future, got to his feet, and joined his companions in the walk back to the hotel.

Mesquite suddenly looked at the sheriff.

"Sorta looks to me that Len Danvers is in danger," he said thoughtfully. "He was th' only man hereabouts that took one of them stolen bills. All but one of th' rest of 'em were cashed hundreds of miles away. That means th' train robbers took mighty good care to spend 'em a long way off. How come they took a chance of changin' one of 'em right here in their own territory? An' when they remember that an' get afraid of that bill bein' traced back to 'em, then what? Won't they try to break th' connection?"

"By gosh!" exclaimed Hopalong. "Yo're right! When they gave Danvers that bill they hadn't thought that th' numbers might have been recorded. After they did think of it they went to a lot of trouble changin' th' others. An' before that they showed th' bills to Ben Peterson an' mebbby others."

"They won't bother Ben," said Johnny. "No man looks at th' numbers on a bill that's showed to him, an' if he did he wouldn't remember 'em. You want to remember they're damn big numbers."

"I'm goin' to take a little ride," said Hopalong. "Danver's shack is thirteen, fourteen miles east of here." He pulled out his big silver watch and glanced at it. "Huh. I'll wait till after dinner. You go back to th' hotel. I'm headin' for th' stable. See you later."

The stableman was leaning back against the front of the building and looked up curiously as the sheriff turned the corner and stopped in front of him.

"Nice day," said the stableman.

"Yeah," replied Hopalong. "That hoss of mine gets a little mean if he ain't exercised. I'm figgerin' to take a ride on him

after dinner to work th' edge off him."

"Good idear," agreed the stableman, reaching for pipe and tobacco. "You wouldn't want to trade that hoss with a little to boot?"

"I wouldn't trade him for th' whole town of Hancock," answered the sheriff, turning on a heel and starting for the hotel.

# 21

TO CATTLEMEN the dinner was a rare treat. The chicken was tender and perfectly cooked, the mashed potatoes creamy, and the other vegetables tender and tasty. The crust of the dried-apricot pie was not too tough or soggy. The three diners had the room to themselves, since they had entered late, and now they sighed gratefully, pushed back from the table, and returned to the barroom, two of them heading for chairs while the third stopped in a moment of indecision, made up his mind, and turned toward the rear door.

“Reckon I’ll give my hoss some exercise, even if I fall asleep in th’ saddle,” he said.

“I’ve rode more’n one mile asleep in th’ saddle,” said Johnny and leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

The bartender smiled and dragged his cloth to and fro.

“It’s a nice day for ridin’,” he said. “There ain’t no wind.”

Hopalong nodded, grunted assent, and walked to the door, through it, and on to the stable. His horse, its coat fairly glistening in the sun, was saddled and tied to a ring on the wall. The stableman came to the office door and looked out incuriously, checking to see that the right man took the horse.

“He don’t seem to be much on edge,” he observed judiciously, “but a little exercise won’t hurt him.”

Hopalong agreed shortly, untied the reins, and mounted. He reached the main street and turned southward. It was not

long before he came to the trail leading eastward, and he swung onto it and followed it. An hour after he had crossed the upper and dry bed of Two Butte Creek he began to see LD cattle, but their numbers were few. Soon he came to the faint, almost unused trail leading northward, and followed it. The tracks of a wagon told him that it led to a shack, and the shack came into sight at the end of the second mile.

It truly was a shack, built partly of logs and partly of unfinished lumber. Its chimney was its best feature, being an honest one of stone and mortar. There was a fenced-in well and a small pole corral, and two stacks of bottom hay, also fenced-in. There was a horse in the corral, and a saddle rested on a tie rail. Evidently Len Danvers was at home.

When Hopalong came to within a hundred yards of the shack there was hurried movement behind a window, and then a tall, young, and rugged man slouched into sight in the open door, his right hand hooked by its thumb to his cartridge belt. His expression indicated nothing.

"Howdy," called Hopalong, slowing his horse to a walk.

"Howdy," grunted Danvers with a trace of suspicion. "What brings you out here?"

"Wagon tracks an' th' promise of water," answered the sheriff with a friendly smile. He stopped a dozen feet from the door. "Also, I want to have a talk with you. I'm sellin' nothin' an' buyin' nothin'."

"Who are you, an' what you want of me?" demanded the ranchman.

"Who I am depends on how well we get along together," answered the sheriff, "an' on whether you give me yore word



that our talk will be strictly confidential. I am an old friend of Ben Peterson's, an' he'll vouch for me."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I've knowed him a long time."

"What you want to talk about?" asked the ranchman.

"Will th' talk be strictly confidential?"

"Yes," grunted Danvers, rubbing his back gently against the door casing.

"All right then. My name is Hopalong Cassidy, although in these parts I'm known as Fred Jones an' want to stay that way. I am th' sheriff of Twin River County. I want to know who paid you that five-hundred bill for th' cattle you sold last fall." He took his badge out of his pocket and held it in his hand long enough for his companion to see it.

"Don't know," grunted Danvers, his eyelids half closed, "don't know as it's any of your business what I took an' who gave it to me. I didn't take no bill."

"I can trace it to you," retorted the sheriff. "As a matter of fact, I have traced it to you or I wouldn't be here askin' questions about it." He smiled grimly. "Might be a good idear, both for me an' you, if we traced it a little farther."

"Don't know," grunted the ranchman, his eyelids still half closed. "They was strangers to me."

"You right shore of that?"

"I'm stickin' to it."

"So I see," retorted the sheriff. "You haven't seen 'em since then?"

"Sorry, Sheriff, but I'm not talkin'."

"You cashed that bill with th' storekeeper over in Hancock, Do you happen to remember th' number that was printed on it?"

"I don't remember it," answered Danvers slowly, "but I writ it down, just in case it warn't good. That what you mean? It's a counterfeit?"

"What good would it do you to write th' number down if you couldn't go to th' man who gave it to you, in case it was a counterfeit?" asked the sheriff. "You have to know who he is, don't you?"

"Was it a counterfeit?" asked Danvers.

"No," answered the sheriff. "It's good money. Can you describe th' men that gave it to you?"

"Why should I?" countered the ranchman. "You say th' bill is good. I sold 'em cattle for it, an' that's all I care about."

"What price did you charge 'em for th' cattle?" asked the sheriff, casually.

"Reg'lar range prices. Why?"

"You didn't charge 'em more than reg'lar range prices?"

"No. How th' hell could I? I already told you what I charged 'em. Why? As a matter of fact I threw off th' odd five dollars."

"Well, that lets you out of it," said Hopalong with a smile.

“What you mean? Outa what?” demanded the ranchman with some truculence. “It lets me outa what?”

“It lets you out of havin’ guilty knowledge regardin’ stolen money,” answered the sheriff. “So far as yo’re concerned, th’ transaction was honest. That also lets th’ storekeeper out of it, over in Hancock. No, that’s not right. He was out of it all along. You still figger you can’t describe them buyers?”

“Yes.”

“An’ you ain’t never seen ’em before an’ you ain’t seen ’em since?” persisted the sheriff.

“Look here, Sheriff,” replied the ranchman. “I ain’t stickin’ my nose into other peoples’ troubles. I got enough of my own. Also, I think right highly of my health an’ my skin. I ain’t talkin’.”

“Don’t hardly blame you,” replied the sheriff. “You say you writ down th’ number of that bill. Have you told that to anybody else?”

“No. Why should I?”

“Then don’t,” said the sheriff sharply. “Plumb forget that you ever saw a five-hundred-dollar bill. If th’ news should get around that you can identify that bill you’d have damn good reason to worry about yore skin an’ you wouldn’t have to stick yore nose out a-tall. But don’t destroy th’ record of that number. Hide it but keep it. You figger you’ve had any of yore cattle stolen since last summer?”

“No!” snapped Danvers. “What th’ hell’s goin’ on ’round here?”

"I'm follerin' yore own play; I'm not talkin'," answered the sheriff, smiling again. "But if you knowed th' answer to that question you might be a hell of a lot surprised. I want to warn you to watch th' cover wherever you ride. In other words, look out for ambushers. Put curtains to yore winders before you light yore lamp at night an' stay in th' shack till daylight. Well, I'm glad to have met you an' hope to see you in town sometime. So long, an' keep yore eyes peeled."

"Wait a minute," hastily said the ranchman. "I don't know what th' hell you've been talkin' about!"

"Well, there's one thing you can be shore of," countered the sheriff. "What talkin' has been done between us was mostly done by me. So long."

"If that bill was stole an' I've just admitted acceptin' it, like a fool, how do I know that I won't get into trouble about it?" asked the ranchman, a scowl on his face.

"Because you accepted it innocently," answered the sheriff. "You wasn't required to show any diligence in tryin' to find out if it was stole. If you had sold yore cattle for considerable more than th' reg'lar prices that would suggest that you knowed th' money was stolen an' was takin' advantage of that knowledge. As it is, you ain't got nothin' to worry about on that score."

"Can it be taken away from whoever has it now?" demanded the ranchman curiously.

"No. Not unless th' possessor has guilty knowledge," answered the sheriff, "an' then it would take some time an' trouble."

"*You* couldn't take it away from him if you knowed for shore that it had been stole?"

"No."

"Where does that leave th' man it was stole from?" persisted Danvers.

"It leaves him able to bring a civil suit in replevin *if* th' thief still has th' money, which in this case is not so. What th' original lawful owner can do in regard to goods proved to have been bought with it, with identifiable stolen money, I don't know. I'm not a lawyer."

"You don't seem curious about th' number of that bill," said the ranchman, himself now curious.

"I'm not. Don't destroy that number, an' mebbby put yoreself in th' position of bein' an accessory after th' fact. You've told me that you have a record of th' number. So far, yo're entirely innocent. You better stay that way." Hopalong eased the Stetson up on his head and looked the ranchman in the eye. "If you've let on to yore friend, Ben Peterson, that you know that number then you'd better ride over an' tell him to forget it. Now for a little business talk. I said I wasn't sellin' nothin'. I ain't. I find that a man can alius tell th' truth easier than he can a lie. How would you like to buy some graded bulls to improve th' weight of yore cattle? Say, Durhams?"

"Huh! Graded bulls! With th' whole damn range lousy with scrubs," retorted Danvers. "Besides, graded bulls cost too much for me."

"You an' yore neighbors can alius sell off th' scrub bulls," said the sheriff. "However, if anybody asks you that's what I come to see you about. I'm goin' to try to sell graded bulls to a lot of folks in this part of th' country, mebbby, on th' chance that I can make up a herd of 'em that'll pay me to deliver 'em. It may also give me a chance to do some lookin' around where I ain't wanted. So long."

“So long,” replied Danvers, gently and thoughtfully scratching his head. He started to speak, thought better of it, and then, leaning back against the doorframe, watched his visitor ride away and slowly disappear. Suddenly he snapped his fingers and hastened toward the corral, grabbing up the saddle as he came to it. A few moments later he was riding at a gallop on his way to Peterson’s, and an observer, if one had been present, would have noticed that he gave critical attention to clumps of brush and patches of weeds and also that he rode with his rifle across the saddle horn.

Hopalong was smiling as he rode back toward town, for now he had an unbroken chain leading from himself, now with the stolen bill in his pocket, back to the unknown cattle buyers. It was late in the afternoon, almost suppertime, when he reached Hancock. He had forsaken the trail and taken a short cut as soon as the roofs came into sight. He turned the horse over to the stableman and walked slowly toward the hotel. Johnny and Mesquite were not in sight. He stopped at the bar and bought a drink and as he raised the glass he thought he heard the low mutter of familiar voices coming from the street. The strength of the voices did not increase, and he heard no steps.

“Well,” said the bartender with a smile, “did you work up much of an appetite?”

“Yeah,” grunted the sheriff, pushing the empty glass from him. “With th’ dust like it is I was glad there warn’t no wind.”

He glanced at the door leading to the stairs. “Our new friends sleepin’ off their dinner?”

“No,” answered the bartender, nodding toward the swinging doors. “They’re outside, settin’ on th’ edge of th’ sidewalk.”

"Sorry it ain't Satidy," said Hopalong, grinning. "I'd shore like to set in a good game tonight. Well, reckon I'd better wash up an' get ready for supper."

"I reckon you can get into a game tonight," replied the bartender. "There's three of you here now, to start with." He glanced at the clock. "You got near fifteen minutes."

Three men pushed through the swinging doors, and Hopalong paused to nod to them. They were the three townsmen with whom he had played poker a few nights before. As he turned again toward the stairs Johnny and Mesquite came in, and the bartender made the proper introductions. When the sheriff came downstairs again the dining-room door was open, and animated conversation was coming through it. Two tables had been pushed together, and as he entered the room the owner of the stage line beckoned to him and pointed to a chair. Hopalong joined the group. There no longer was any reason to worry about a friendly poker game that night, and the thought made him smile.

"Yeah," Johnny was saying. "I been figgerin' to try to get a punchin' job somewhere around here. I don't want to get too far away from this kind of grub."

"Me too," said Mesquite with a laugh.

Hopalong looked across the table at Hank Barlow, the city marshal and the owner of the stage line.

"I want to get to a Wells, Fargo office," he said, knowing that it would be in Little River. His interest was in the town and not in the express office. "Where's th' nearest one?"

"Little River. Forty miles," answered Barlow. "I make it twice a week."

"What make coach you use?"

"Concord, with thorough braces," answered the stage man. "It rides like a rockin' chair."

"Huh," muttered Hopalong thoughtfully. "Forty miles there an' forty miles back. Damn if I ain't had about all th' longdistance hossback ridin' I want for a while. When's yore next trip?"

"Tomorrow mornin' at seven sharp," answered Barlow. "We'll get you to Little River by eleven. We leave there at two in th' afternoon an' get you back here around six."

"That's right good travelin'," commented Hopalong. "You must change teams to make that kind of time."

"Yes sir," said Barlow. "We have a swing station at th' halfway point. May I have th' pleasure of bookin' you for th' trip?" "I'll be obliged to you if you will," answered Hopalong.

"If you like you can sit with the driver. We seldom have many or even any passengers. It's mostly mail and express. I couldn't afford to keep th' line runnin' except that it's practically an extension of Wells, Fargo an' gets a cut of th' mail subsidy." His face became animated, and his eyes glowed.

"I've always been a stage man. I was a division superintendent on th' Old Overland, under Ben Halliday. By Gawd, there was a real stage man an' a real stage line. Ran like a clock, it did. A million-dollar investment, rollin' through near nineteen hundred miles of wilderness. You should have seen some of those teams! Most of them were matched for color an' weight. Nothin' like it had ever been seen in th' history of th' world.



“Ben had th’ stage business by th’ tail on a downhill haul, but he knowed th’ railroad was goin’ through an’ he sold out, lock, stock, an’ barrel to Wells, Fargo but he made a mistake: he was thinkin’ only of th’ straight-line haul from th’ Missouri to Hangtown. That day was over, of course, but he didn’t stop to think that th’ railroad would increase passenger an’ express business. He didn’t stop to figger out that th’ stage business -would grow by more an’ shorter runs. Th’ railroads would populate th’ wilderness; towns would spring up, many of them miles from a railroad station. He thought he was sellin’ Wells, Fargo a dead hoss but he wasn’t.

“As long as I live I’ll be proud to remember that I was a part of th’ Overland Stage Line, an’ an important part. An’ I saw th’ beginnin’ an’ end of th’ pony express. By Gawd, mister! It makes me tingle just to think of it. It was th’ pony express that ruined Russell, Majors, an’ Waddell. It put them into bankruptcy an’ gave Ben Halliday his chance to take over their stage line. He took me over along with it, an’ I stayed with it as long as he did. Oh, excuse me, sir. I live too much in th’ past.”

“Marshal,” said Hopalong earnestly and sincerely, “if I ever had been a division superintendent of th’ Overland Stage Line I’d talk so much about it that I wouldn’t have a friend left. I did my little share in th’ great cattle movement up from th’ South. I know how you feel an’ I’m proud an’ honored to know you, sir.”

Supper over, they rose and filed into the barroom, where Sam handed the box of chips and a deck of cards to the first man who came to the bar, and another mild game was soon under way.

## 22

THE TEAM was already harnessed to the stage when Hopalong left the hotel on the following morning. He looked up the street and saw the outfit standing in front of the stage office. The vehicle was drawn by five mules, the two heaviest at the wheels, the two lighter ahead of them, and the lightest in the lead. They were splendid animals, well fed, well conditioned.

Hopalong entered the office, paid for his round-trip ticket, and wandered out again. The driver followed on his heels, climbed to the box, and motioned for the sheriff to follow him. They rolled on a score of yards, stopped at the general store, which was the post office, picked up a scanty sack of mail, and were on their way, the driver's hand full of reins, his right foot resting lightly on the end of the long brake handle.

"Two hours to Halfway," he said, squirting tobacco juice down wind. "I did it twice in one forty, he boasted. Want I should try for it again?"

"No, thanks," grunted the sheriff hastily. "You lived in this part of th' country very long?"

"Ten years an' more."

"Any tannery hereabouts?"

"Nope. A hide buyer comes up here spring an' fall. All he gits is flint hides, some of 'em salted. Th' tannin' business is damn complicated. A tanner has to know his job. You'd be surprised if you knowed how many grades of hides there is,

an' how many different ways of tannin' 'em. A good tanner throws away nearly a quarter of a beef hide; th' belly ain't no good. Yearlin' an' heifer hides is th' best, an' bull hides th' worst. My old dad used to work in a tannery. If these damn-fool ranchers would get some sense in their heads an' make their brands smaller th' hides would be worth more."

"Mebby they would be," replied Hopalong, "but they couldn't be<sup>e</sup> seen an' read so far off. Big brands save considerable ridin'."

"Huh!" snorted the driver, spitting again. "Just th' same, I ve seen local hides half ruined because some damn fool was too free with a straight iron. You take that Tom Jones, of th' TSJ. Most of his brands are fairly small, but this summer I saw some of his marks that just about spiled a full half of th' hides."

Hopalong was thinking swiftly. TSJ. That could grow out of what mark? Try as hard as he could, he could find no answer so far as certain other brands were concerned.

'Is Tom Jones th' only rancher hereabouts that raises hell with his hides like that?" he asked.

Yep, grunted the driver, his foot bearing down on the brake handle as the coach rolled down the slope leading to Two Butte Creek. "Th' other Joneses' brands are small enough, I reckon. Last summer they drove a big herd down this here trail. Must ha' been near four hundred head. An' would you believe that you could read th' brands of near a quarter of 'em damn near as far as you could see th' critters?"

"Did you hear if they lost any head on th' way?" idly asked the sheriff.

"Nope. Why?"

"I was just wonderin'," replied the sheriff. "I'm a trail herder myself."

"It's only a ninety-mile drive to th' railroad," said the driver. "They wouldn't likely lose none in that distance."

They rolled across the shallow creek, and the mules settled down to a walk up the further slope.

"I still say it's a damn shame to spile so much good leather," said the driver. "You can't do nothin' with that scar tissue but cut it out an' throw it away."

And so they talked and rolled and bounced and swayed behind a fine team and under the cunning hands of a master driver. Halfway came into sight, and the mules quickened and threw more weight into their collars: rest and feed and water were there. They rolled up to the station with the clatter of shod hoofs and in a cloud of dust. The relay team was harnessed and waiting. The station keeper moved like a cat, without a waste motion. This was his job, and he took pride in it. The old team was unhooked, the new one in its place in what seemed to be the wink of an eye. Then on again, with only twenty miles to go. Even in so humble a job there was training, practice, pride. Hopalong felt his pulse quicken as he saw, in his mind's eye, those one hundred ninety odd of Halliday's station tenders changing teams twice a day: one, eastbound, the other, west. God, it was good to be an American, and in all America there was no place like the West!

The sun lacked an hour of reaching the meridian when they splashed through the unhurrying waters of Little River, the hurtling drops gleaming like jewels. The heavy iron tires grated over the gravel bed and then rolled almost noiselessly through the deep dust of the cut-bank road. The

curve was now behind them and the town ahead. It was several times larger than Hancock. Dogs darted from yards and the side streets barking ferociously but keeping wary eyes on the great whip in the driver's expert hand.

A few loafers marked out one building, but over their heads there was a greater marker, a marker famous from one coast to the other and a marker of the course of history and of man's endeavor: WELLS, FARGO CO'S EXPRESS.

The coach rolled on to the post office and stopped before it. Hopalong swung down and looked about him. The courthouse was on the other side of the square, and he was about to walk toward it when he remembered that he was supposed to visit the express office.

The clerk looked up inquiringly.

"What time does th' next coach leave for th' railroad?" asked the sheriff.

"Tomorrow mornin' at six o'clock sharp. Would you like to make a reservation, sir?"

"No. I can't do that yet," answered the sheriff. "Thank you."

He stepped out to the sidewalk and looked for a barbershop, found one, and not much later felt a lot better.

The courthouse was a two-story frame building, and as Hopalong entered the front door he saw a sign suspended over a door near the end of the corridor: SHERIFF'S OFFICE. He pushed open the door and walked in. A tall man was tipped back in a chair, his feet on a desk.

"Howdy, stranger. What can I do for you?"

"You th' sheriff?"

"Yep."

"I'm Sheriff Cassidy, from Twin River."

"By gosh! Glad to meet you. Set down. Take off yore coat."

"Thanks," replied Hopalong.

"My name's Carter. Yo're a long way from home."

"Yes. I've been told there's a hide buyer in town by th' name of Jameson."

"Yeah, Pete Jameson," replied the local sheriff, looking curiously at his guest.

"What you know about him?" asked Hopalong.

"Nothin' very good. Nothin' very bad. Just run of th' mine. Why?"

"Would he buy hides of stolen cattle?" asked Hopalong.  
"Hides that showed brand alterations?"

"I dunno. Let's go 'round an' talk to him."

Hopalong shook his head.

"I don't want him to get a look at me or even to learn that I'm in this part of th' country. He'll be startin' off on a hide-buyin' trip purty soon an' will likely meet me over in Hancock. I don't want him to know me."

"You willin' to swear out a search warrant?" demanded Carter.

“No. All I have to go on is suspicion, though it’s ragin’,” answered Hopalong. “Anyhow, he made his last trip this spring an’ he’d have got rid of ’em long before this. I didn’t come down here with th’ idear of pickin’ up any definite information or hope to have much luck but I have to play every card in this game. I just can’t overlook nothin’.”

“Who’d be foolish enough to sell him such a hide, even if he’d be willin’ to buy it?” asked Carter.

“Nobody. But such a hide might accidentally get mixed up with a bunch of honest ones. Human bein’s make mistakes.”

“Yeah, it might, but th’ odds are ag’in it. You set here an’ wait for me. I won’t be gone long, I reckon,” said Carter. He opened a drawer of the desk and placed bottle and glass close to his visitor’s hand. “Help yoreself.”

Pete Jameson was leaving the hotel, working energetically with a toothpick, and at the sheriff’s hail he paused and half turned. The sheriff joined him and they walked slowly along the street toward a building bearing a sign which said: Grain and Feed. Hides Bought.

“Pete, when yo’re out buyin’ hides you ever pick up any of ’em that shows th’ brand’s been changed?” asked the sheriff.

“Who’d be fool enough to let me see one?” demanded Jameson sharply.

“Nobody, I reckon, but there’s such things as accidents, you know.”

“Yes, there’s accidents,” admitted the other. “Come on in an’ set for a while. Who told you about it? That damn helper I had to fire?”

"Oh, I have ways of learnin' about things that my job's interested in," answered the sheriff with a broad and knowing smile. "Where'd you git it, an' what happened to it?"

"I got it outside yore jurisdiction an' when I discovered it I built up a big bonfire right then an' there an' burned th' damn thing. I didn't even bring it into yore jurisdiction. You ain't got anythin' on me, an' I'll swear that I never told you a word about it."

"You won't have to swear to nothin', fur's I know, Pete," replied the sheriff with a smile. "You ain't said where you got it or what th' brand was."

"It's a right fine day, Sheriff. Have a drink an' quit askin' questions. You won't get th' answers. I don't want no enemies layin' in th' brush waitin' for me when I'm out with th' wagon."

"Don't, huh?" asked the sheriff, grinning broadly. "Don't blame you none, but mebbby you got 'em already, waitin' for a chance to dry-gulch you. That's good liquor, Pete."

"What you mean I got 'em already?" demanded Jameson, his face getting red.

"Don't you figger that coyote that slipped up on that hide missed it later on an' knowed just where it went?" asked the sheriff.

"By Gawd!" exclaimed the hide buyer. He was silent for a moment, doing some deep thinking. "Well, I'll have to chance it. Anyhow, there ain't no evidence to back me up, even if I did tell about it. Yeah, I like that liquor myself." He grinned. "Drop in ag'in sometime."



“That’s a good point, Pete, but you wouldn’t have to back up such a statement. If some pesky law officer believed it an’ went huntin’ around on that range he might make a hell of a lot of trouble for somebody if there was stolen cattle on it.”

“Have another drink?” asked the hide buyer.

“Not now, Pete. You wouldn’t care to go so far as to say whether that hide came from th’ north or south or anythin’ like that?”

“It came from outside this county an’ was burned outside this county, which keeps it outside yore jurisdiction. So long, Sheriff, an’ be shore to drop in ag’in someday.”

“So-long, Pete, an’ thanks for what you have told me.”

Back in his office again the sheriff threw his big hat at a chair, missed the mark, and sat down in front of his desk. For a few moments he did all the talking and his brother officer did the listening. Then Hopalong did the talking, Carter the listening, and then they both talked at once. They stopped abruptly as steps sounded out in the corridor, rapidly coming nearer.

Pete Jameson entered the room, nodded to Carter, and glanced curiously at the stranger, who frowned momentarily at being seen by this hide buyer.

Carter chuckled.

“You might as well get acquainted now that you’ve met each other,” he said. He looked at Hopalong. “What’d you say yore name was?”

Hopalong swore under his breath.

"My name's Fred Jones, an' you know it an' you didn't forget it. Nobody in this whole damn country wants to improve their

cattle. Well, reckon I'll get somethin' to eat an' be ready for th' stage. So long."

"Try th' *hotel*!" said Carter. "Best grub in town. So long."

The two men watched him leave, and after a moment Jameson walked to the door and glanced about the corridor. Then he turned and faced his companion.

"You put damn unpleasant thoughts into a man's head, Sheriff," he said.

"Alius did, even as a boy," laughed the sheriff. "What's makin' yore dandruff shed?"

"That--that made a mistake with that hide!" growled

the hide buyer. "I'm takin' no chances on bein' dry-gulched. That damn thief might get to figgerin' that he's in a tight spot. That leaves him only one thing to do, an' he ain't goin' to do it to me. Anyhow, I never did get enough hides over there to make it really worth my while to go after 'em. I can't prove a thing about that hide, but you wanted to know where th' damn cow pelt came from. All right. It came from th' TSJ up north an' west of Hancock. I hate like hell to miss th' meals in th' hotel over there but I'm all through with that part of th' country."

"I figger yo're wise," replied the sheriff. "Here, have a drink of my liquor. I'm hungry as a wolf an' I ain't et yet. Come on an' walk with me as far as th' hotel."

"All right," replied Jameson, pouring a small drink.

“You don’t rightly remember, now that you’ve started in rememberin’ things, what th’ original brand was?” asked the sheriff a few minutes later as they stopped for a moment before the hotel door.

“Yes, damn his whiskers!” growled the hide buyer. “It was either TC or TCJ—no! It was TC.”

“TC?” repeated the sheriff thoughtfully. “Wait a minute! How th’hell can you change TC into TSJ? Yore mem’ry gettin’ bad ag’in?”

“Think so?” snapped Jameson, dragging an old envelope and a pencil out of his pockets. He labored for a moment. “Well, take a look at that.”

The sheriff obeyed, and a look of admiration flashed to his face.

“Well, by Gawd! Adios, Peter, adios!”

“Go to hell,” replied the hide buyer.

“In due time, Peter, in due time. So long!”

## 23

HOPALONG was ruefully comparing his meal with those served in the Hancock Hotel when he glanced up and saw Sheriff Carter heading straight toward his table. The newcomer's stride was purposeful, and his face was wreathed by a smile.

"You ever hear of th' TC?" asked Carter as he hung his hat on the rack.

"TC?" echoed Hopalong, frowning slightly as an aid to thought. "Yes. There's a TC over in my county. Tom Colby. Why?"

"Well, there's nothin' like puttin' th' fear of th' Lord an' a Sharp's rifle in a man's soul to make him think," chuckled Carter. "It also starts his mem'ry workin' slick as grease on an axle. Our friend Pete is rememberin' things. You also ever hear of th' TSJ? An' know where it's located?"

Hopalong's eyes narrowed, and he leaned slightly over the table.

"I've heard of it an' I've been on it, an' it's located north an' west of Hancock. An' you couplin' th' TC an' th' TSJ together makes me damn interested! What about 'em?"

"You was speakin' about playin' every card in th' game an' you come over here so you wouldn't overlook nothin'," said

Sheriff Carter. He leaned back in his chair and laughed and then he sobered quickly and leaned the other way. "Th' card you played by comin' ' over was an ace. You also spoke

about accidents. Well, by Gawd, there *was* an accident. Th' very kind you was thinkin' about. On th' TSJ a hide with an altered brand got into th' pile of skins they sold to Pete Jameson. Pete discovered it later on an' promptly took th' trouble to build a big fire an' burn it up. An' th' flesh side showed that th' original brand was TC. How's that for pistols, Mr. Colt?"

"TC into TSJ?" muttered Hopalong. His mind was playing with letters again, twisting them, shifting them while Carter leaned back and grinned.

Hopalong shook his head.

"There's some mistake," he said with a frown.

"That's how I figgered," chuckled Carter. He took a pencil and a piece of paper from a pocket and made a few quick strokes. Then he shoved it across the table.

"Damn smart, huh?"

"Well, I'll be-" said Hopalong. "I've got two letters to write, an' they got to go out on th' Hancock stage today." He was pushing back from the table. "I've got to get paper an' envelopes."

"You ain't finished yore dinner!" protested Sheriff Carter, his eyes twinkling.

"Hell with dinner!" retorted Sheriff Cassidy.

"If they ain't got paper an' envelopes here you might look in th' left-hand top drawer of my desk," suggested Sheriff Carter. "There's stamps there too. See you later, I reckon?"

"Shore. Thanks. So long," replied Hopalong and walked swiftly toward the door. The bartender gave him what he wanted, and Hopalong, paying for his dinner, took the writing materials to a table and went to work.

The first letter was short, addressed to the Hancock Hotel, and concerned his horse and his belongings. The second was long and was addressed to Mr. John Arnold, in care of the hotel. Hopalong was about to address the second envelope but stopped his hand in time: the handwriting on the two envelopes should not be the same. He really knew nothing about the bartender. He picked them up, together with the pen and the ink bottle, and got to his feet. Sheriff Carter was leaning against the bar, rolling dice for the drinks, and he looked around at the sound of quick, hard steps.

"Hello, Mr. Jones," he said, smiling. "Get in here an' gamble. Low man pays for th' drinks."

"Later on," answered Hopalong, holding out the blank, sealed envelope. "I got a stiff finger. Would you mind writin' an address on this envelope for me?"

"From what I've heard about you I alius figgered that yore fingers was damn limber," replied Carter, taking the envelope and then reaching for the pen and ink bottle which Hopalong had just placed in front of him. "Yore finger just sorta petered out after so much writin', huh?" He chuckled. "Well, I reckon they won't look alike." When he handed the envelope back there was no question of the same handwriting being on the two envelopes, but there might easily have been a question as to who the hell could read either of them.

"I got to get these in th' mail right away an' then see th' stage driver," said Sheriff Cassidy. "See you later an' buy

you a drink."

The letters mailed, and Hopalong assured by the postmaster that they would go out on the Hancock stage, Hopalong went over to the express office and booked a seat on the southbound Wells, Fargo stage next morning. He could get to the railroad almost as soon as he could get back to Hancock and his horse. It was a difference of less than twenty-four hours, and the trip by train would more than make up for that. And he always liked to ride on Mr. Pullman's palace cars if the distance was not too far.

"When do th' northbound stages leave th' railroad for here?" he asked.

"Tuesdays an' Thursdays," answered the clerk. "Th' eastbound an' th' westbound trains get in within an hour of each other, an' we meet 'em both."

Hopalong nodded happily, paid for his ticket, and went out to the street, and as he looked up it he saw the Hancock stage, ready to leave, standing before the post office. He walked toward it, noticing that while its passenger service was nil its express business westbound was heavy. One box caught his eye and made him grin. A new supply of Johnny Walker would be in Hancock when he returned. The whisky made him think again of Abner Jones: he expected to have quite some pressing and important business to transact with Abner. For Abner's sake he hoped that the Hancock barber's razors would still be sharp.

The driver stepped from the post office with a mail sack in his hand. It looked ridiculously large for the amount of its contents. The driver grinned, pointed up to the box, and spoke.

“Might as well climb up,” he invited. “We’ll be away in about two jerks.”

“Reckon yo’re right about th’ jerks,” replied Hopalong with a friendly grin. “I’m not goin’ back with you this trip. Got some business to do farther south. When’ll you be here next time?”

“Friday. Well, time I was leavin’.”

Hopalong turned and watched the Concord take the corner on two wheels, instantly threatened by two flank attacks by the town’s dogs. There came the sharp crack of a whip and the yelp of a more impulsive canine followed it. The sheriff grinned and headed for the hotel, where he stopped at the bar close beside his brother officer, made arrangements for room, supper, and breakfast, and then picked up the dice and cup. The first round was on him, but he was thinking so deeply that he had to be reminded of it. He should have obtained affidavits from Danvers and the storekeeper to back up his request for the issuance of the warrants, but, no, that would have showed his hand.

He turned to the sheriff.

“Will you try to get an affidavit from Jameson for me?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll try it right now,” answered Carter, finishing his drink and starting for the door.

The hide buyer looked up and frowned slightly when he saw who his caller was.

“What you want now?” he demanded.



"Just want you to make a statement about that hide an' swear to it," answered Carter with a smile.

"Right now Fm in a position to deny everythin' I've told you about that damn hide," retorted the buyer. "After I make a written statement an' swear to it I ain't. Why should I take a chance of gettin' into trouble?"

"There won't be any trouble," replied Carter.

"Yeah, but mebbly I'll have to go over to Twin River for th' trial an' lose a lot of time," objected Jameson, shaking his head.

"You'll have to go anyhow, in that case," responded the sheriff. "You ever hear of a subpoena?"

"Why didn't I keep my fool mouth shut?" growled the hide buyer.

"It's yore duty too," said the sheriff. "It's also to yore interest to get rid of cattle thieves. How do you know that another accident like that won't happen again an' you mebbly will not be lucky enough to discover th' hide? How'd you like to have a hide like that traced back to you?"

"All right, let's get it over with," growled Jameson, getting up and reaching for his hat. He went with the sheriff to the courthouse and into the office of the clerk.

"Hello, Pete. Hello, Sheriff. What can I do for you?" asked the clerk.

"Pete wants to make a statement an' swear to it," answered the sheriff.

"All right," replied the clerk, uncorking an ink bottle and reaching for pen and paper. "Go ahead, Pete. A few words at a time."

When the clerk was writing down the letters of the two brands he hesitated for a moment but kept on writing. The job finished, he laid down the pen and looked up at Jameson.

"Better read it over, Pete. I figger you've made a mistake with th' brands," he said.

"No mistake," grunted Jameson, picking up the pen and signing the statement.

"No mistake a-tall," chuckled the sheriff.

The pen scratched a few more lines; the clerk wrote his signature and reached for his seal.

"All right. Two bits."

He handed the document to the hide buyer, who passed it on to the sheriff.

"What you goin' to do with it?" asked Jameson as they left the office.

"It's goin' to th' sheriff's office over in Twin River."

After supper Hopalong found the local sheriff herding up a poker crew and gladly joined it. This was a stiffer game than those over in Hancock, and it put him on his mettle. It was also a game where a bluff meant something. In the general conversation he seized on an instant of silence, looked across the table at Pete Jameson, and made a cryptic remark.

“Mr. Jameson,” he said, “I wouldn’t advise you to change yore hide-buyin’ territory next trip. Th’ reasons for th’ change won’t be there any more, but I’ll make shore of that an’ try to let you know about it in plenty of time.”

The hide buyer’s lids narrowed speculatively as he studied the speaker’s face. You could easily see that thoughts were flipflapping about in his mind. He glanced quickly at Sheriff Carter, caught the slow, heavy nod, and grinned suddenly.

“I’ll not be in too much of a hurry to start out this fall,” he said and then looked at the pot. “An’ now she’s up a dollar more.”

# 24

FOR BREAKFAST Hopalong had fried beefsteak, and he suspected that it was not only cow beef, but from an aged cow. The fried potatoes were greasy, the butter margarine and could speak for itself, the coffee muddy and bitter, but the biscuits were crisp and flaky. You give some cooks a package of Arbuckle's, and they raise hell with it.

He walked slowly to the stage-line office, his eyes on the Concord and its six-horse team. And it surely was a team, fairly well matched as to size and color. Horses, huh? That meant that the south road was hard instead of sandy. The driver and the hostler came into sight, carrying a heavy iron box between them. They slid it into the boot under the seat and closed and fastened the apron. The clerk appeared in the doorway, nodded at Hopalong, and glanced at his watch.

"Yo're th' only passenger this trip," he said. "You might as well ride on th' box. You have two minutes."

"Thanks," replied the sheriff, stepping on the hub of the front wheel, from there to the iron step behind the brake handle, thence to the projecting step of the boot. He moved over to the left-hand side of the seat, rolled and lighted a cigarette, and waited.

The driver climbed up a moment later as the clerk tried the door handles, the hostler let loose of the lead team, and the long whip cracked like a pistol. There came a sudden pounding of hoofs, a lurch which sent the coach body rocking on its thorough braces, the grind of iron tires and the gently protesting whispers of rubbing leather, the creak of wood and the clinking of chain. The clamorous dogs

renewed their warfare, but the driver flicked a bit of hair and hide from the nearest, and then they were out of town, rolling southward.

"Where's th' next swing station?" asked Hopalong idly.

"Twenty-five miles. Halfway," answered the driver. "We take it easier than some runs I've knowed of. No use arrivin' all a-lather an' hang around two hours waitin' for th' train. Otherwise we'd have to break it into three sections, an' that would mean another station an' more expense. Don't you get to worryin'. We'll be there in plenty of time. Which train you figgerin' to catch?"

"Th' westbound."

The driver nodded and kept his eyes on the road and the team. The day was clear and sunny with not too much wind. The miles rolled behind them; the coach swayed from side to side, to and fro. They crossed a creek, and the driver glanced quickly at the sun.

"Right on time," he grunted as he eased off the brake for the upward slope. "Better country down here."

Hopalong had been noticing that more grazing cattle were in sight, and he nodded. He was watching the team below him, and the driver's quick, sidewise glance saw his interest.

"Purty picture, ain't they?" he asked proudly.

"Purty as hell," enthused the sheriff. "You don't know anybody that might buy some graded bulls, do you?"

And so they rolled on and on. The swing station consisted of a shack, stable, corral, and a small blacksmith shop for shoeing horses and mending small metal. A haystack was to

one side, protected by a pole fence. There was a fenced-in well, with trough, windlass, and bucket.

The country seemed to flatten out a little more, and the views grew wider and longer. The cattle increased in numbers. There came another creek and again a quick glance at the sun. Most drivers carried watches, but it seemed that this one believed the sun to be more reliable.

"Be there in another hour," he said, placing his right foot on the footrest at the top of the long brake handle as they came to and pitched down a steep descent. On the top of the opposite rise he stopped and breathed the team for a few minutes, and the sheriff's heart warmed to him for this consideration and he wondered if twenty-five miles, at the pace they had held, wasn't just a little too far.

"You been drivin' long?" asked the sheriff just to be saying something.

"Since I was a mighty young man," answered the driver, swinging wide of a deep rut. "I rode th' Pony for six months."

"You rode th' Pony Express?" exclaimed Hopalong in surprise. He looked at the driver's face, but it was a poor indicator of age.

"Yes sir! I worked for Russell, Majors, an' Waddell as long as they lasted. Rode pony till I got too heavy an' then drove stage. My pony trick was from 'Dobytown, which was Fort Kearney on th' Platte, to Midway, which got its name because it was halfway between Atchison an' Denver. When Halliday took over th' line I worked for him, then drove for Wells, Fargo an' I still am. Midway served th' best meals along th' whole line from Atchison to Hangtown. Dan Trout kept it, an' his sisters was damn fine cooks. Nobody went past Midway around mealtime, not if they knowed about it."

Lizzie and Maggie Trout were famous along the line, almost as famous as the infamous Jack (Joseph) Slade.

“Th’ Platte section was grand country for a driver. He was never lonesome. Emigrant wagons, stage coaches, pony riders as long as they lasted, bull trains, and detachments of cavalry were in sight most all th’ way. Why, some of them bull trains was so close together that th’ dust didn’t have time to settle between ’em. Look over there a little to th’ left. See it?”

Hopalong saw it. For a short stretch the sun glinted from polished rails. A line of telegraph poles marched up out of a ravine over the top of the little divide and on down the other slope. Far off to the right a small ranch house could be seen. For the last two hours wagon tracks had left the stage road here and there, to wander out of sight over the high, prairie swells. It was country to warm the cockles of a man’s heart.

They swung around a low butte and straightened out again, with the distant town popping into sight almost like a rabbit out of a magician’s hat. About the only difference between this town and Little River was that it had a railroad station, a water tower, and lacked a courthouse.

“There she is,” said the driver, letting the team drop to a walk. “We ain’t makin’ no close connections; we ain’t meetin’ nothin’ in a hurry an’ we ain’t needin’ to make fast time from here on. I alius like to rest ’em whenever I can,” he apologized. “We’ve missed th’ eastbound. I ain’t got nothin’ for it. So I let ’em get their breath.”

“They’ve shore earned a rest,” replied the sheriff. Here was a man who had lived with horses all his life and who knew them, perhaps, better than he did his human friends.

The driver chuckled, his thoughts in the past.

"In th' old days I used to come a-hellin' into th' stations, an' in them days there was some sense in it: them stages had a hell of a long way to go, an' they had to be on time. Let a driver start losin' time on a nineteen-hundred-mile run, an' he found hisself bein' asked some questions, specially by th' next driver. There ain't no sense doin' it here."

"What's th' name of th' town?" asked Hopalong, mildly surprised that he had not learned it. He had asked for a ticket to the railroad and had not even glanced at it.

"Gravelly Ford. Some of th' gold diggers used it when they stampeded into th' badlands. Most of 'em died there, I reckon, because th' Sioux riz up an' went lookin' for hair."

They drew up before the express office, in which the post office was housed. The hostler was waiting, climbed up to the box, and sat there until the clerk waved him along. The stage rolled around the corner of the building to be checked and greased for the return trip in the morning.

"Have a drink?" asked the driver as he stepped out of the office.

"I could use one," answered the sheriff. "How much time we got?"

"Plenty. Besides, she ain't alius on time. She's been climbin' a hell of a lot of grade since she crossed th' Mississippi. Come on."

They had a drink, two of them, and then the driver waved toward the door.

"Let's go to th' station. Might as well wait there. I alius like to see 'em come in," he explained. "Th' agent's a queer cuss. He woulda been killed with Custer except he was sick in th'



post hospital an' couldn't ride. You reckon it was Custer's or Reno's fault?"

"Let's not get into any fight," laughed Hopalong. "I got to get shaved. Then I'll meet you at th' station. He followed the driver's pointing arm and headed for the barbershop.

The agent was a queer cuss. He had not ridden with Custer, which undoubtedly saved his life, but he had gotten himself mixed up in another fight and had lost his scalp. The wig he wore was anything but convincing. And it seemed that when he lost his scalp he had lost his temper, the use of words, and his trust in all human beings, red, white, or black. As Hopalong stopped before the ticket window the agent looked up and said nothing.

"One-way ticket to Twin River on a Pullman palace car," said the sheriff.

After a moment's wait the ticket was shoved across the counter to him, and its cost briefly announced. Hopalong paid for it, put it in a pocket, took his change, and grinned mischievously.

"Who was to blame—Custer or Reno?" he asked.

The agent glared and then hurried to a suddenly clattering telegraph relay, which suddenly stopped as the stage driver loafed over to the ticket window.

"On time?" he asked.

The agent risked the safety of his wig by violently shaking his head.

"Twenty-eight minutes," he grunted and reached for some waybills.

Hopalong and his companion sauntered out to the platform and sat on an empty baggage truck. Suddenly the driver arose, went out to the track, knelt down, and placed his ear against a rail. It was beginning to talk. He got to his feet and went back to the truck.

"Bet you a dollar she'll be in sight in ten minutes by yore watch," he offered.

"I never play another man's game," laughed Hopalong. "How long have you been listenin' an' figgerin'?"

"Ten years," answered the driver with a wide grin and pulled out a big watch—to Hopalong's surprise after the way the driver had timed his run. "You got to figger it different in cold weather," he said. "It shifts gradual from one season to th' next."

The station agent appeared, tramped down the platform, and pulled a lever. A red board slowly swung up and out over the track.

The driver chuckled.

"I was just wonderin' if he'd forget," he said. "If that board wasn't up she'd go through here like a Pony hoss 'less she had somethin' to put off."

"This ain't a reg'lar stop then?" asked the sheriff.

"Nor for either of 'em, westbound or eastbound. This lady is th' Pacific Express, an' she shore expresses."

She did but, seeing the red board, she stopped. The driver scratched his head as he glanced at the watch. There must have been a rainstorm or a sudden draft of cold air somewhere out there: he was nearly a quarter of a minute

off his timing. He said good-by, waved his hat, and stepped back to see her on her way again. Then he put an ear to his watch and listened intently, although it was not necessary. Normal ears should have been able to hear it tick from a distance of three feet.

Hopalong found a seat and laughed: the driver had called the station agent a queer cuss!

# 25

HOPALONG swung to the platform before the train had come to a stop and looked around to see which of the deputies had come to meet it. Neither of them was in sight, and the color of his neck took on a reddish tint under its tan. He walked to the office and found the door locked, whereupon the color grew a little. He let himself in, and his glance swept over and returned to a pair of dice on the table.

--I" he muttered, and hurled his Stetson onto a chair across the room. He wondered if there was an early-morning picnic or a pool tournament somewhere about. Frank Lorimer had been right to lose his temper. He picked up the few letters on his desk, ripped them open, and read them swiftly. Then he got his hat, jammed it on his head, and the door slammed shut behind him.

The courthouse was two blocks away, and he had plenty of time. It still lacked an hour before the judge would show up. When he entered the building the record room was open, and he walked into it and asked for the county brand book. By now he strongly suspected that there might be plenty of reasons for the three-letter brands of the Jones brothers. He began the search from the rear of the book and worked forward and soon found the entries and the drawings, but he kept on searching. Page after page was scanned and turned, and then he found what he hoped he would find.

The EEJ of today had been the EJ some months before; the GMJ had been the GJ; the MMJ, the MJ, and the TSJ, the TJ. Why had the brands been changed and made more complicated? He believed that he knew the answer to that and had known it for some time. He placed the book back on

the shelf and left the room. As he passed through the front door of the building he met the court clerk and stopped.

"Hello, Sheriff," said the clerk, also stopping.

"Hello, Jim."

"What's under yore hat?"

"Some scrambled idears. I want to swear out some warrants when th' judge comes," said the sheriff.

"He won't be here till th' eastbound gets in," replied the clerk. "He went over to Wild Run yesterday to attend th' weddin' of his son."

"--!" said the sheriff and then began to figure the time tables of the railroad and the two stage lines. He had wanted to take that train himself but he could take it the following day, and it would work out all right. He turned and went back to the office. George had just arrived with the mail.

"Well!" exclaimed the deputy in surprise.

"Get Mike," ordered the sheriff. "Take yore bedrolls, three days' food, an' an extra pair of handcuffs apiece. Ride over to Hancock an' try to get board an' rooms at Mrs. Thompson's. Don't let on you know Johnny or Mesquite an' don't hang out in th' hotel. Get yore drinks somewhere else. Wait a minute. I got to know where I can find you. Make it Casey's saloon. If I want you I'll just walk in, buy a cigar or a drink, and walk out ag'in."

The deputy's mouth was slowly closing, but now he opened it again.

"You ain't foolin'?" he asked.

"I leave all th' foolin' to you an' Mike," answered the sheriff.

"When do we start?"

"About as quick as Gawd will let you," answered Hopalong, going to the safe. He opened the door, felt around inside, and closed it again. "Here's some expense money."

"You goin' with us?" asked the deputy.

"No. I didn't know I was comin' back here till after I got forty miles away from my hoss. I'm goin' back th' way I came. I'll be there near as soon as you will. Get th' handcuffs an' start lookin' for Mike."

"What is it?" asked George, knowing where he would find Mike. He was over in the poolroom putting a new tip on his cue. Leather dried out fast in this country.

"Train robbers an' cattle thieves," answered his boss. "One of them Abe Lincoln bills turned up. Huh! I reckon th' best place for that is th' safe."

"You got it?"

"Yeah," grunted the sheriff, turning toward the safe again.

"Lemme see it!" exclaimed George eagerly. He took it, examined it, and started toward the desk drawer, then stopped suddenly, remembering that it no longer was there. A worried expression came over his face: the blasted poster had lain in the drawer or been on the wall for months, and almost as soon as he had gotten rid of it it was in demand. He handed the bill to the sheriff and showed some alacrity in his start toward the corral.

“Was you thinkin’ of this?” grimly asked the sheriff, pulling the poster from a pocket.

“Uh—yeah,” answered George, his face coloring.

“With all th’ paper we got you had to use this,” said the sheriff, again opening and closing the safe. “Someday I’m goin’ to take you apart, bone by bone, an’ then scrape th’ bones. Now get th’ hell out of here an’ on yore way. Yore first stop ought to be th’ poolroom.”

Hopalong locked the door behind him, visited the barbershop, and then went to Rick Bradley’s, where he hired a saddle horse, and soon was on his way to the ranch, eager to see Margaret Nelson. He expected, naturally enough, that she would be eager to see him but he had no idea of the degree of her eagerness.

He unsaddled and turned the horse into the small corral and then made his way to the ranch house. Buck was playing solitaire on the back porch; Rose was knitting a pair of socks, and Margaret, her sewing lying neglected on her lap, watched every step he took.

He swept off his big hat as he stepped onto the porch. His eyes were dancing and his face alight.

“Margaret, I’m mighty glad to see you! Mighty glad. How are you?” he asked. “Reckon you don’t have to answer that. I’ve never seen you look better.”

“And I’m very glad to see you, Hoppy, but where’s Johnny?” asked Margaret.

“Over in a little town named Hancock with Mesquite,” he answered. “Gosh! It’s like old times to see you ag’in.”

Too much like old times! Why isn't he with you? Why isn't he here? What's wrong? He went to join you, and you come home without him. What's wrong?" she demanded tensely and suspiciously.

"How are you, Rose? An' Buck?" he asked, and then turned to Margaret. "There ain't nothin' th' matter with him. Him an' Mesquite arc livin' on th' fat of th' land an' playin' Californy Jack together. There ain't nothin' th' matter with either of

"But why didn't he come back with you?" she demanded, glints of anger in her eyes. "Why didn't he?"

"Because I'm figgerin' on goin' back to him," answered Hopalong. "He don't even know I'm here, except for a letter I sent him. I didn't know I was comin' back to Twin River till I was forty miles from Hancock. I'll only be here till th' eastbound gets in tomorrow."

Her face showed anger, and her lips were pressed tightly together.

"Why are you going back, and why did he and Mesquite stay?" she persisted.

"I just told you why they stayed," he answered patiently. "I'm goin' back with some warrants, extra handcuffs, an' a couple of deputy badges," he explained, suddenly becoming nettled by the unexpected and abrupt attack. "It just happens that I'm sheriff of this county, an' there's some cattle thieves over there. I've just sent my two deputies over there. When it comes to cattle thieves it's my job to round 'em up an' bring 'em in."

"I admit that it is *your* job, but it most certainly is not Johnny's!" retorted Margaret, her eyes flashing. "Has the time come when you can't do your job by yourself?"



Hopalong flushed, and by now the smile had left his face.

"Sorry," he replied. "I can do any job by myself that I'm called on to do. I didn't ask any help from him, nor Mesquite, either. He declared himself in an' he's a growed man an' he has a mind of his own; at least he used to have that kind. He's a good citizen, a cattle owner, an' as such he hates cattle thieves. What should I have done with him—tied him up an' pushed him under his bed?" he demanded.

"You could have brought him back with you! That's what you could have done!"

"But I told you that I didn't know I was comin' ' back here till I was in a town forty miles away. I wrote him a letter an' told him that I'd be back in a few days an' I told him th' truth." His eyes narrowed, and his gaze was direct. "I'm not goin' to quarrel with you, Margaret—not now, nor ever."

He turned to Rose, whose expression betrayed her consternation.

"I'll be on my way back to town," he said. "I just come up to get a change of clothes. I'll be back ag'in in Twin River in a few days or mebbby a week. Take care of yoreself an' don't pamper Buck too much. Hi, Buck! Cut down on yore eatin' an' get more exercise. Good-by."

He swung from the porch and strode toward the corral, his back stiff and his shoulders squared. Saddling, he mounted, rode to his own quarters, obtained what he needed, and rode on again. He ignored Buck's hails and kept on going.

Back in town again, he turned the horse over to Rick Bradley and then walked to the hotel, where he traded grins with the clerk.

"Hi, Hoppy!" said the clerk. "Room? Shore. You can have yore old favorite. Hey! Wait a minute. I got somethin' to show you. This here hotel is a real hotel, right up to taw. Come on, foller me. You ain't never seen anythin' like it before."

"That so?" replied the sheriff, slowly following the proud and excited clerk up the narrow, steep stairs. "What is it?"

"You wait an' see," answered the clerk, leading the way along the upper hall. The smell of paint filled the corridor, and a new wall, with a door in it, had been run across the farther end of it. The turpentine smell made Hopalong glad that his room was at the other end of the hall.

Throwing open the door, the clerk stepped back and shoved his companion through the entrance.

'There!' he exclaimed, pointing to a low and wide article set against the wall. "Lookit that! What you think of it?"

Hopalong had seen them before in Kansas City and Chicago, but he hid the fact.

"What th' hell is it?" he asked, staring curiously.

"A bathtub! A real zinc bathtub! Th' only one in this part of th' country. See here," said the clerk, leaning over the side of the tub and picking up a metal stopper. "You plug that hole there like this, pour in th' water, an' there you are. When you get through you pull out th' plug, an' th' water runs down th' pipe an' into th' back yard. What you think of it?"

"Reckon it's all right," answered the sheriff with a grin. "Where'd you get it?"

“Travelin’ man sold it to us. They’re right common back East.”

“Well, I shore can use it,” replied the sheriff. “Have it filled up with warm water, an’ I’ll ride it if it throws me.”

“Fill it up with warm water!” exclaimed the clerk in quick indignation. “It’ll take a couple of hours to heat that much. You’ll get th’ reg’lar ration.”

## 26

WHEN THE EASTBOUND arrived the sheriff was there to meet it and the judge as he stepped to the platform. They walked up the street together, talking earnestly, and instead of going home the judge led the way to the courthouse. Less than an hour later they left the building, and Hopalong walked back to Rick Bradley's livery stable, hoping to be able to get up a game of draw for that night. When he returned to the hotel the clerk's face brightened, and he hastened to the kitchen to have the hot water carried up to the bathroom. Hopalong got his change of clothing out of the old carpetbag, put the warrants into it, and waited for the knock on the door that would tell him the bath was ready.

Supper over, he picked out a comfortable chair on the front porch and waited for the poker players to arrive. He had nothing to do until the eastbound came in the following afternoon. He considered taking the accommodation but quickly shook his head: while it left early in the morning it not only stopped at every station, had none of Mr. Pullman's palace cars, but did not run through the night. Locally it was known as the dog train.

His breakfast told him that the Hancock cooking had spoiled him, but he had a second cup of coffee, poor as it was. A hotel should use the higher grades of coffees. Arbuckle, by the case, cost about eight cents a pound. He visited friends and hung around the office with nothing to do. When, carpetbag in hand, he reached the station he was half an hour early.

The train hardly had started before a stranger stopped and leaned against the end of the seat.

“Howdy, stranger.”

“Howdy,” grunted Hopalong, new thoughts flicking through his mind.

“There arc three of us tryin’ to get one more for a game of poker,” said the stranger with a warm and friendly smile. “I was wonderin’ if you’d like to set in?”

If Tex had been with him the sheriff would have been very glad to sit in, but three to one in a crooked game made the odds entirely too heavy.

“I’m th’ sheriff of this county an’ I got some thinkin’ to do,” replied Hopalong coldly.

A queer expression passed over the stranger’s face, and he nodded and disappeared.

Morning found Hopalong tired and grouchy; he had passed a miserable night, but after breakfast the sun seemed to shine brighter, and the passing landscape seemed to be less monotonous. Mr. Pullman served excellent coffee.

After a while the conductor, an old friend, sought him out and sat down facing him. Here was a good chance to check his watch and get the right time, almost to a second. He found that he was nearly ten minutes fast.

“Yo’re not forgettin’ that I want to get off at Gravelly Ford?” asked the sheriff.

The conductor was about to speak when the brakeman opened the rear door, stuck his head into the car, and called.

“Gravelly Ford! Gravelly Ford!”

The train was slowing on an upgrade, and the cars were jerking at each other. The telegraph poles grew farther apart and then hardly moved. The sheriff picked up his carpetbag and was soon on the station platform. He saw the stage driver and raised his hand.

“I see you met her today,” he said.

“Yep. Had a money box an’ some mail for her,” replied the driver. “You goin’ back with me?” He nodded and smiled. “We’ll be here till th’ mail an’ express is sorted from th’ wdst-bound. You’ll have plenty of time to eat.”

The westbound came and went in a cloud of dust, smoke, and litter, apparently not in the least discouraged by the hundreds of miles of upgrades before her. She would be bucking them until she rolled over the continental divide. The mail sack thumped the platform and skidded up against the station, the driver in quick pursuit.

At last Hopalong climbed up to his seat on the box, the carpetbag between his feet. The driver joined him, released the brakes, and then the team surged against the collars. A mile from town they met a trail herd, tightly bunched, its crew alert against lonesome range animals which might decide to join it. Hopalong’s eyes searched out the brands, his mind busy with these and other marks. In the short time at his disposal he had not seen a single brand from up Hancock way.

The swing station came into sight and grew rapidly larger. While the teams were being changed he climbed down and drank his full of sweet, cool water. On again they went, rolling and swaying, and the shadows began to lengthen. They had been lucky, for what wind there was had blown

from the side and carried the dust kicked up by the team off the road instead of behind. The cuts were now filled with shadow, and then far ahead could be seen the roofs of Little River, short glimpses of them from the tops of the little divides. Soon the Concord swung into the main street, the dogs gathered and barked, and the nearing Wells, Fargo sign at last met them and ceased to move.

The waiting clerk crossed the sidewalk, looking at his watch.

"Yo're ten minutes late," he said, and laughed at his own nonsense.

The driver glanced affectionately down at the team.

"An' I'm damn glad of it," he said with a grin. "I reckon I'll lose my job."

"We had to stop an' fight some Injuns," laughed the sheriff.

"When you fight Injuns you don't stop," said the driver with a reminiscent chuckle. "Not till they down a hoss. Thank Gawd them days are over."

Hopalong shook hands with his seat mate and walked stiffly toward the hotel. Funny how a man's legs would stiffen up after a five-hour stage ride. He signed the register and turned from the desk and almost bumped into Sheriff Carter.

"Come on, Mr. Jones, let's roll for th' drinks an' then have supper together. You have a good trip?"

They rolled, and Hopalong lost again. If he were to remain in town much longer he would get some dice of his own. The roast beef was tough, stringy, and cooked to hell and gone, and the potatoes were soggy, but he was hungry, and a man had to eat. He and his brother officer wandered out to the

porch, found chairs, and tipped back against the wall until a shrewd chill crept into the air. They went inside, joined four of Sheriff Carter's friends, and played stud poker until midnight. When the game broke up the Twin River sheriff was eight-dollars winner, and he forgave the bar dice their sins.

At eleven the next morning Hopalong wandered down the street toward the express office, his eyes on the far side of the square. The dogs began to bark in chorus, and he stopped and waited. The mules burst into sight, the stage rocking behind them. It was a sight to stir a man's blood. The outfit took the last corner and stopped before the post office. In a moment it was under way again and this time stopped before the express office. The hostler climbed up as the driver climbed down, and the latter grinned widely as he saw his Monday passenger. He liked to have someone to talk to on what was, to him, a long and monotonous trip.

"Goin' back with me this trip?" he asked, biting strongly into a plug of tobacco.

"Yes, an' damn glad to start eatin' ag'in in th' Hancock Hotel's dinin' room," answered the sheriff with a smile. "Them dogs got you figgered to a couple of inches."

"I can put on a longer lash an' fool 'em," chuckled the driver, "but they don't mean no harm."

Two o'clock came around, and Hopalong walked to the stage standing before the Wells, Fargo office. The team of mules was the one he had seen on the Monday trip, rested and full of energy. He climbed up to his own half of the seat and waited. A few moments later the driver joined him, grasped the reins, released the brakes, and cracked his long whip. Again the coach lunged; again the dogs charged and



retreated. The last building went smoothly past, and they were truly on their way to Hancock.

As they rolled along the main street of the town the sheriff saw Mike and George loafing on Mrs. Thompson's front porch. There was no recognition on either side. Johnny and Mesquite sat on the edge of the high sidewalk in front of the hotel, their legs swinging gently. They raised lazy hands in a polite salute, and Hopalong did likewise.

The proprietor of the stage line met them as they stopped in front of the office.

"You have a good trip?" he asked.

"Couldn't have been better," answered Hopalong, swinging down with his carpetbag in his hand. The extra handcuffs and the deputy badges had been wrapped in his soiled clothing and made no sounds. "See you at supper?"

"Yeah," answered Barlow and then walked forward to pass a hand over a knee of the leading mule.

"How are you?" asked Johnny, looking up. Mesquite nodded and smiled.

"Slick as grease," answered the sheriff and let the twin doors swing shut behind him.

"Have a good trip?" asked the bartender, moving his cloth back and forth.

"Yes. An' now I'll have a good drink," said Hopalong. "Some of that new scotch."

"How'd you know we had any?" asked the bartender curiously. "Dinin'-room doors are open now."

“Saw it loaded onto th’ stage over at Little River,” answered the sheriff with a grin. “Ah! That shore hits th’ spot. Glad to get back to yore grub. That cook of yours has plumb ruined my future. See you later.”

He heard footsteps behind him but did not glance around. Johnny and Mesquite trailed him into the dining room and pulled back chairs at his table as he looked up. Other steps were coming nearer, and they belonged to Hank Barlow. The latter nodded as he joined them, drew back a chair, and raised his voice.

“Hey, Les, what we eatin’ tonight?”

“Roast chicken, mashed potatoes, biled onions, an’ creamed cauliflower,” came the prompt answer from the kitchen.

“I never heard nothin’ like that before,” sighed Mesquite happily.

## 27

AS THEY PUSHED back their chairs and headed for the door, Barlow in the lead, the sheriff tarried and lagged behind. An idea had popped into his mind, and it caused him to grin with anticipation. He could convey the message to his friends verbally without arousing suspicion but decided to get more enjoyment out of it and to keep his hand in.

He stopped in the little hall in front of the door and at the foot of the stairs, where he was out of sight of the bar. Mesquite and Johnny had found chairs against the farther wall of the barroom and leaned back against the wall, and the former, glancing up and catching sight of the motionless sheriff, saw a rapid and very complicated movement of hands. His interest quickened, and he watched carefully. The message was ended and then repeated. Mesquite made a quick gesture and then sat back and closed his eyes as the sheriff entered the room and stopped at the bar.

*See—you—dark—after—bury—earth. See—you—dark—after? —bury?—earth? Huh. After? Yeah, it also meant behind. Bury? Burial? Earth? Ground? Huh. See—you—dark—behind—burial —ground?* Mesquite could have done it better with the aid of short cuts, but he had learned the sign language while he was learning to talk. Hoppy had his tribes a little mixed up, but that was common and of no importance. The sign language, like the Indian spoken languages, was based upon concrete conceptions, and different tribes had no trouble talking in it. He looked toward the bar, caught the sheriff's eye, and bowed his head, not bothering with the rest of it.

He turned his head to the other side and mumbled something.

Johnny did not change position.

Barlow, Hopalong, and the bartender were talking and telling jokes. Daylight faded, and the bartender lit the lamps. The doors swung in and closed after the harness maker. They had a round of scanty drinks, and Barlow suggested a poker game.

"Let's have a change," said Hopalong thoughtfully. "I'm gettin' a mite tired of penny ante."

The bartender flashed him a quick glance. By Gawd, he *was* a professional gambler, after all! But he'd done a fine, artistic job of leading up to what he really wanted: a bigger game.

Barlow looked a little surprised.

"I was lookin' for a friendly game," he said, suspicion in his eyes.

"Shore," replied the sheriff with a smile. "So am I. Let's keep th' stakes th' same but make it a table-stakes game to th' extent that when a man's chips are gone he's out. There'll be others comin' ' in to keep th' game goin'. It'll make a man fight a little harder in a penny-ante game."

The bartender scratched his head and viewed this suggestion from all the angles he could dig up, searched his head for more, found none and also no enlightenment at all, and finally gave up the puzzle.

"That's all right," agreed the stage man. "An' it shore will make a man play his best game. What you say, Ike, to a

game of freeze-out?"

The harness maker nodded and held out his hand for the cigar box of chips.

"Th' steeper th' grade, th' better I am," he chortled.

"I got to mail a letter an' mail it tonight," said the sheriff, "but it won't take me long. Get th' game goin', an' I'll set in later." He looked at the man behind the bar. "Sam, you got pen, ink, paper, an' an envelope?"

The bartender felt on a shelf under the bar and provided the articles in question, and Hopalong took them over to a table and hunched over the job. In a few minutes he carried the pen and the ink back to the bar and started for the door.

Casey's saloon was going full blast when he stepped through its front door. George and Mike were playing cards in the rear of the room without any enthusiasm. The former glanced up curiously and then gave his attention to the game again. Hopalong bought a cigar and walked out again and thoughtfully put the cigar out of sight in a pocket. After a few steps along the sidewalk he stopped and leaned against the corner of a building and waited.

"Ah, I'm gettin' fed up on this fool game," growled George. "What you say we quit it an' walk around th' town?"

"All right," assented Mike, and he laughed. "That won't take us very long." He stood up and led the way toward the door.

As they passed the corner of a near-by building they slowed, listened carefully, and almost imperceptibly nodded and they kept on going. When they were half a block away the sheriff lazily pushed from the wall and slowly strode down the street toward the hotel.

The game was under way when he returned to the big room, and he drew up to the table, bought his chips, and watched Mesquite lose a pot. He noticed that Johnny's stack was not as high as it was when it was bought. He glanced up as he heard steps near the bar and saw Ira Smithers, the blacksmith, stop for a drink. A few moments later Smithers walked over to the card table and stood looking on.

"It's freeze-out, Ira," said the stage man with a chuckle. "Th' way I'm goin' tonight it won't be long before I'll make an empty chair for you. She's up a blue."

"Call," grunted Hopalong, tossing in a chip. "They're good," he said, showing his hand.

"I ain't figgerin' to wait for nobody's chair," growled Smithers, turning away. "I can git a chair of my own if you hawks will move a mite closer together."

Mesquite lost another pot and restacked his chips for luck. Johnny won, and chuckled.

"Nobody'll get my chair," he boasted. "What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock," answered Hopalong and then looked up quickly. "What you say? I was thinkin' of somethin'."

"Ten after eight," said Barlow, glancing at his watch. "Why?" he asked curiously.

"Wonderin' how long I can stay in th' saddle," laughed Johnny. There was no need now to lose his chips quickly.

Mesquite swore under his breath, pushed back, and chose a chair against the wall. A quarter of an hour later Johnny, grinning ruefully, left the table and went to the bar, Mesquite following him.

"Hank too much for you fellers?" asked the bartender with a grin, shoving glasses and bottle across the counter.

"Make mine beer," said Mesquite. He laughed self-consciously. "It wasn't Hank Barlow as much as it was th' damn luck."

"Too early to go to bed," said Johnny. "What you say we get some fresh air? When this fool game's over we can mebbby start another."

The storekeeper came in, his face brightening as he saw the game, and he headed straight for it. Johnny and Mesquite finished their drinks and went out into the night as a shout of laughter burst from the table. The grinning storekeeper dropped onto a chair, bought chips, and chuckled as the game was made known to him.

Hopalong counted his chips and laughed. .

"They're near gone," he said, "but I stayed longer than them Arnold boys. An' I ain't out yet."

Barlow grinned.

"Th' Kid lasted just a mite more'n an hour," he said.

Four more hands went by, and then Hopalong threw in his last chip. He picked up his draw, glanced at it, and tossed his hand in the discard, to another burst of laughter. He replied to the banter as he walked toward the bar.

"Gimme a cigar, Sam," he said. "Th' way my cards was runnin' I'm glad it was penny ante instead of a real game." He glanced at the table. "That game ain't goin' to be over very soon, an' I figger to kill some time an' be on hand when th' new one begins."

He walked to the little doors and held them open, staring idly out into the darkness. After a moment of indecision he pushed between them and was lost to sight, the sound of his hardhitting heels on the board sidewalk drifting northward. The bartender heard the steps without paying any particular attention to them and shook his head: so far his suspicions had been wrong. The new Mr. Jones had shown no indication of being a professional gambler.

Hopalong proceeded leisurely until he could make out the headboards of the graveyard in the bright starlight, and then began to sing, in a low voice, the first verse of "Whisky Bill." He heard a sudden low murmur of voices and a low chuckle.

"Over here, Hoppy," came a low call.

The sheriff swerved, headed toward the voice, and soon saw four men seated on the ground, and they laughed contentedly as he stopped and dropped down beside them.

"This reminds me of th' meetin' in the old 'dobe corral in Hell's Center," said Johnny reminiscently. "I shore hope this talk turns out as well as that one did."

"Don't see why it shouldn't," replied the sheriff, "but at that talk th' leads had all been follered down, an' all we had to do was to close in an' end th' job. This time we still got to foller th' leads an' then close in."

"You must have learned somethin' worth while when you was away," said Mesquite, smiling in the dark.

"I learned enough," replied the sheriff. "An' what f learned has turned this whole setup from a guessin' game to a game of action. When we had our last talk alongside th' road just outside of town I said we had no right to go 'round killin' an'



skin-nin' cattle on suspicion just so we could look at th' flesh side of th' brands. I figger we got that right, now, but only one of th' brands will be easy to spot. Th' others won't stand out. If we find that easy brand has been changed that will give us th' go-ahead signal an' will explain without no more guessin' why it an' th' other registered brands were changed in th' brand book. Th' changes was all done legal, but th' reason for changin' 'em was not legal by a damn sight."

"What is that one brand?" asked George curiously. He felt for papers and tobacco and rolled one in the dark. Putting it into his mouth, he let it dangle and made no attempt to strike a match.

"It's th' TSJ," answered Hopalong, "an' it, likewise, is not th' only brand among th' Jones herds which has been changed so as to take in some brands from over our way, which can be changed by joinin'. Some of these TSJ brands are twice as big as th' others. Tom Jones has two different-sized brands on his cattle, an' th' big uns will stand out like a house afire. He got rid of 'em in a drive last summer, but there's just a chance that a cow or two strayed off his range, up past its fringe, an' escaped that beef roundup. From now on two of you boys will have to spend yore time tryin' to find such an animal. If you find one kill it an' skin it an' cut out th' brand for evidence."

"Huh!" muttered Mesquite thoughtfully. "To do that right an' also to keep out of sight of any of th' Jones brothers an' not arouse anybody's suspicions, we ought to start our ridin miles north an' west of th' TSJ an' work in closer to it as we do our searchin'." He glanced up. "What did you find out about th' other Jones marks?"

"Hah!" laughed the sheriff. "I told you I found plenty, an' here it is. Up to early last summer all them Joneses was

satisfied with two-letter marks, an' then all of a sudden they yearned for three-letter brands. They was several days ride from Twin River an' they made that ride, filed new brand certificates, paid th' fees, an' rode back ag'in."

"They must have had a good reason to go to all that trouble, said Johnny thoughtfully. "An' it meant more time an' work at th' brandin' fires."

"Every man of 'em had a damn good reason to change his brand," said the sheriff. "Let's take 'em in order. Take Ed Jones: he was satisfied with his EJ mark until he discovered that it wouldn't take care of th' FL an' LF brands of Frank Lorimer an' Larry French. But th' EEJ would take care of 'em, just by addin' a few strokes to 'em. Now, let's have a look at George Jones mark. It used to be GJ but now it's GMJ. Charley Norris' CN fits right snug into that. Matt Jones used to be th' MJ. Now it's th' MMJ. That's right handy if he happens to steal some NJ or MN cattle from th' ranges of Nat Johnson or Mark Nelson up north of Twin River. An' cattle was stolen from th' boys of that whole region.

"Now we come to th' TSJ, belongin' to Tom Jones. He didn't have to change over from a two- to a three-letter mark but he did it, just th' same. Mebby he did it just to keep in step with his brothers, and then it would look a little better an' might be safer."

Grunts of satisfaction and appreciation replied to him, and he turned to Mesquite, the latter's remarks in his mind.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "You start well north of th' TSJ an' work south, but make it more north than west. Th' west is damn near just plain desert without enough water or grass." He rubbed his chin. "I suggest that you pair up. Say George

an' Mike, Johnny an' you. That'll let us work twice th' amount of territory in th' same time."

"You mean we all search for th' big TSJ brands?" asked Mike in surprise.

"Yes," answered the sheriff. "That is th' only Jones brand that has to be double big if it was changed over from th' TC, which is Tom Colby's mark up north of Twin River. All th' other brands can be changed without makin' 'em bigger."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Johnny. "How can a man change TC into TSJ?"

"I just about told you," answered Hopalong, grinning in the dark. "You can't turn a C into an S without makin' th' letter twice as big. You've got to add a reversed C onto th' bottom of th' original C. That will make a brand that is easy to pick out. Then you've got to double th' length of th' stem of th' T an' then burn on a J just as long."

"Damn if you ain't right," agreed Mesquite, "but how'd you get onto it? What made you figger this Tom Jones coyote did anythin' like that?"

"Because a hide buyer got some flint hides from th' TSJ, an' one of 'em showed that changed brand," answered the sheriff. "Th' buyer just happened to turn it over, an' what he saw made him build a big fire an' burn th' hide. I've got his affidavit, an' that was enough to send me to Twin River an' get th' warrants I needed—that, an' a few other things."

"Do we serve th' warrants or come back an' report? asked George.

"You take th' warrants with you," answered the sheriff. "Once we start movin' we got to move fast. There s a search

warrant an' a warrant for arrest in each case. Don't use th' warrants unless yore hand is called, unless Tom Jones happens to catch you skinnin' off th' hide. We want to get th' evidence first." "Suppose we find a changed brand an' cut it out of th' hide," asked Mike. "What'll we do with it? Where'll we hide it? We'll be takin' a chance of havin' it seen if we bring it back to town with us an' try to take it to our room."

"That's right," muttered the sheriff. "Huh!" After a moment's deep thought he chuckled.

"There's only one answer to that that I can find, he admitted. "You got to carry yore badges an' handcuffs. If you find such a brand cut it out an' then go after Tom Jones. Take him an' th' hide straight to Twin River an' keep off th' trails. One of you ought to be able to do that, an' th' other come back to Hancock after searchin' th' house.

"For what?" asked Mesquite.

"For a five-hundred-dollar bill or a canvas money sack with printin' on it," answered Hopalong, "though I'll give odds of ten to one you won't find th' sack." Then he told them exactly what the printing was.

"We'll start in th' mornin'," said Johnny, with enough grub to last us several days. Right after breakfast. You'll have to give us th' warrants, badges, an' cuffs between now an' then.

"I got 'em all with me," said Hopalong. "I'm loaded down like a pack hoss. I didn't dare leave 'em in th' carpetbag. That hombre that makes up th' beds would be shore to get curious. What would a cattle buyer be doin' with such things?

Mike laughed.

“Well, sometimes a cow critter is throwed an’ hog-tied,” he said, “but I never heard tell of ’em bein’ handcuffed.” He glanced at his brother deputy. “Me an’ you’ve got a job to do, George.” He looked at Johnny. “You fellers takin’ th’ east or west part of that country?”

“Don’t make no difference, I reckon,” answered Johnny. “Give us th’ west part.”

“All right,” agreed George, and then he chuckled. “If I find any five-hundred-dollar bills you’ll mebbby never see hide nor hair of me ag’in.”

“Wonder if anybody else has been froze out of that game?” said Johnny. Let s go back an’ find out. I figger on havin’ better luck now that I don’t have to lose ’em.” As he got to his feet he looked at Hopalong, who was dragging objects from his pockets. “Might be a good idear if you swear me an’ Mesquite in right now,” he suggested, taking the badge and handcuffs offered him, and a few words later he and Mesquite were special deputy sheriffs.

## 28

JOHNNY AND MESQUITE were the first into the dining room the following morning, filled up on ham and eggs, pancakes and molasses, took their rifles from where they had stood them against the wall, and stopped at the bar.

"We're goin' off lookin' for a job," said Mesquite. "May not be back tonight, but hold our rooms for us."

"Don't figger you'll find any jobs around here," said the bartender.

"Mebby not," replied Johnny, "but we shore can't find any if we don't go lookin' for 'em."

They went out the rear door to the stable and soon, mounted, they rode around the hotel and stopped before the-general store.

The proprietor looked up as his door opened, listened to the list of food and tobacco, and grunted. He piled it up on the counter, checked both heaps, and announced the price. He made change and then smiled.

"Looks like yo're ridin' on ag'in," he said. "In that case you'll want a couple of gunny sacks. That freeze-out game too hard on you?"

"We'll get into some more of 'em when we come back," answered Johnny, filling the gunny sack. He picked it up by the middle and led the way to the door.

At Mrs. Thompson's boardinghouse George and Mike had enjoyed their breakfast and waited near the kitchen for the

mess of baked beans which their landlady, at their urgent request, had prepared the night before. With the beans was a slab of bacon and a large piece of ham, two dozen biscuits, and a jar of oleomargarine. Not much later they were riding northwesterly along the trail leading to the EEJ and the place where they would leave it. Hopalong had described that section of country as well as he could. They loped along, talking of this and that, and then Mike turned a frowning face to his companion.

"This TSJ job will be easy compared with th' others," he said. "All we got to do is look for a double-sized brand an' not pay any attention to th' rest. If we find a double sizer that will be *it*, but Gawd only knows how many cows we'll have to skin when we move on to th' other ranges."

"I ain't seen many changed brands, provided th' new lines wasn't added too long ago, that I can't spot by partin' th' hair," replied George. "A newer-lookin' scar will tell us what cow to kill an' skin."

"You think a hell of a lot of yoreself," retorted Mike.

"Got good reason to," complacently replied his companion. "There's some things that a man can do better'n other men can, an' I'm a top-hand brand examiner."

"You wouldn't also claim to be a top-hand liar, would you?" asked Mike. "Them brands was changed a year ago."

"You wait an' see," replied George. "Of course, bein' a year old will make it harder."

"Huh! Gettin' th' old excuse ready!" snorted Mike, his eyes on a point far ahead where the trail made a bend. "That's th' place, I reckon," he said, nodding at it.

"Yeah, reckon so," said George. "All we got to do after we get through with th' TSJ is rope 'em, throw 'em, hold 'em down, an' do some right smart feelin' an' lookin'." He felt for tobacco and papers, "I'll do th' lookin'."

"Yeah?" asked Mike, his voice rising. "You'll also do yore fair share of ropin' an' throwin' an' holdin'." He, too, felt for tobacco and papers. "Yo're damn strong on picnics, but this ain't goin' to be one. This not only is goin' to be hard work, but we got to keep our eyes skinned or some Jones hombre will set his sights on our hides."

"Mebby so, mebbly not," replied George, "an' as for anybody settin' his sights on us we got some sights of our own." He glanced up the trail. "Yeah, here's th' turnoff place, all right. Wonder if these hot beans'll turn sour on us?"

"Not by the time we'll be eatin' 'em," answered Mike, leaving the trail.

It was past noon when they angled down a slope toward the rill at its foot and believed that they could chance making a fire to cook their bacon, make coffee, and warm up the beans. They had not seen a TSJ animal for more than two hours and after eating they would range from east to west and back again, working steadily southward and nearer to the TSJ range proper.

When Mesquite and Johnny left town they followed the trail leading westward toward Twin River until they came to the forks about six miles out, where they chose the right-hand trail and pushed on at a lope. When noon overtook them they were well to the north and west of the TSJ ranch house, according to what information Hopalong had been able to give them. They built a canny fire, scant of smoke, and cooked their midday meal. Then they began ranging to and



fro, back and forth, in long sweeps which gradually led them southward. They rode all afternoon without seeing the brand they sought and as the light began to wane they turned, struck north again, and camped for the night on the bank of a small, sweet-water creek. Hobbling their horses, they cooked their supper and sat before a small fire until time to roll up in their blankets and turn in for the night.

Awake at dawn, they had breakfast, caught and saddled their mounts, and again took up their search, this time working more to the east. Their trend would be steadily more easterly and sooner or later they expected to meet Mike and George. The sun was nearly overhead when Mesquite, topping a rise, whistled shrilly and raised an arm. Then he dropped down the far slope like a stone falling in a well. Johnny whirled his horse and raced toward the spot. As he crossed the top of the rise he saw Mesquite's rifle go to his shoulder. The report of the shot was flat. Johnny raced on, and when he drew rein he was at his companion's side, looking down at the body of a steer whose brand was so large as to be ludicrous.

"No doubt about it!" exclaimed Johnny, swinging from the saddle. Mesquite joined him, and they went to work on the hide, their interest only on one part of it. The job did not take them long, and a few minutes later Mesquite held up the portion of the hide bearing the brand and slowly turned it around. There was the original small c, and there, clumsily added to it, was the new and reversed c. Had this brand been S originally there would have been no break, no jointure, but a sweeping, unbroken line. The jointure was careless, and the added mark showed a cicatrice considerably newer than that of the old mark.

"No wonder that buyer burned that hide," said Johnny with a chuckle.

Mesquite rolled up the piece of hide, fastened it to his saddle, and mounted.

"We got what we went after," he said and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"An' we've got all we need to drop in at th' TSJ ranch house an' pick up Tom Jones," said Johnny. "That means that one of us will have to take him an' th' hide to Twin River an' be out of all of th' rest of th' fun."

"Yeah. Better toss a coin," said Mesquite.

"We can do better than that," replied Johnny, a grin threatening his ears. "We can turn th' hide over to George an' Mike an' let them do th' coin tossin' an' make th' arrest. Hell, we're only special deppeties, while they are reg'lar ones."

"Come on, Johnny," exulted Mesquite. "If we can find 'em soon we'll be able to get back to town an' into a penny-ante game before it's over."

They ignored the fact that they were hungry and that they had eaten no noon meal. They pushed eastward at good speed and perhaps an hour later they saw a thin finger of dust over a rise just ahead. Their own dust had been seen, too, and when they topped the rise they found themselves under the sights of two rifles.

Johnny flung up an arm and shouted. George and Mike lowered their guns and rode slowly forward to meet their friends.

"Got it!" shouted Mesquite, indicating the large roll tied against his blankets. "Got it! It's all ready for you. Shove it

under th' nose of Tom Jones an' pick him up! Then get him to Twin River as quick as Gawd will let you!"

"Let's see it!" exclaimed the two deputies almost in unison. They pulled to a stop and took the roll of hide. George yanked it from his companion's hands and swiftly unrolled it.

"Lookit that!" he exulted. "Man, *will* you look at it! Th' dumbest jury that ever sat can't doubt this evidence."

"Come on," said Mike eagerly. "Let's go get that damn cattle-stealin' coyote an' put him where he belongs. An'," he added, "I hope he goes for his gun."

"Wait a minute!" objected George, a canny expression slipping over his face. "You hombres found th' hide, an' you ought to take Jones to Twin River."

"We're only special deppeties," explained Johnny sorrowfully. "Yo're reg'lar ones. We're turnin' it over to you, an' yore duty is plain."

Mesquite nodded.

"An' also, all th' credit," he said. "I can see th' folks of Twin River linin' th' street to watch you bring him in."

"Come on!" cried Mike, wheeling his horse. "Come on an' get that damn thief! Get him before he smells somethin' an' high-tails it!"

George was still studying the faces of the special deputies, but it seemed that he had no choice. He whirled and raced after his already departing brother officer.

Johnny and Mesquite sat quietly in their saddles until the shrinking deputies had shrunk about to nothing, and then

they looked at each other and laughed.

"I figger we hadn't ought to go to town tonight," said Mesquite. "We got grub enough left to last us another day or mebby even two. If we'd had any sense we'd have cut us a couple of steaks off that steer, an' th' grub would reach still farther."

"Shore," replied Johnny thoughtfully. "If we go to town we'll only have to come back tomorrow. Let's go back, get us a big steak apiece, head back this way, an' camp farther east, up north of Ed Jones' range."

"Somebody ought to take th' news to Hoppy," objected Mesquite after a moment's thought.

Johnny threw back his head and laughed.

"One of th' reg'lar deppeties won't have nothin' to do but to go to Hancock tonight," he said, and laughed again. He looked around quickly. A small cloud of dust was suddenly swirling around him, and he wheeled and raced after the rider who was making it.

George and Mike, loping southwesterly, were hopefully scanning the country about them for sight of the trail leading from the EEJ to Hancock. Sooner or later they would have to find it, and, once found, all they would have to do would be to follow it northward. They cut it within an hour after they had left Johnny and Mesquite, much to their surprise. They had worked much farther south on their ranging than either of them had thought. As soon as they caught sight of it they turned to their right and rode along it, George a quarter of a mile in advance, according to the strategy they had worked out while searching for the trail. Two miles farther on George suddenly stood straight up in his stirrups, and instantly his brother deputy left the trail at

an angle and dropped out of sight on the far side of a rise, whereupon George rode ahead at a walk.

Smoke was coming from the chimney of the shack, a horse was moving slowly around in a small pole corral, and a saddle lay on the ground against the front wall of the house. As the rider drew near a man suddenly stepped into the doorway, his right hand out of sight behind him. Then he slowly brought it forward and let the rifle slant toward the ground.

"What you want?" demanded the ranchman with a scowl.

"What's th' nearest town, an' how far is it?" asked George, dropping the reins over the pommel and reaching for the round, white cardboard tag hanging from his upper vest pocket. Finger and thumb of the other hand felt in a lower vest pocket for cigarette papers.

"Hancock," growled the ranchman, his eyes not shifting from the stranger's face. "What you doin' on my range?" He took two quick steps forward. "Yo're th' second stranger that's pestered me in th' last few weeks, an' he asked th' same question."

"You ought to pull up stakes an' move on, with folks crowdin' you like that," said George sarcastically. He saw Mike's face at the corner of the shack and nodded slightly. "You better put down that rifle, mister, before you get hurt. Yo're under arrest."

"Don't move!" snapped Mike, his gun leveled.

"By Gawd!" shouted the ranchman, and the rifle started to swing up. Mike's gun jumped in his hand, and the rifle jerked loose and fell a step from its owner.

“Don’t move ag’in,” snapped Mike. “Face as you are an’ put yore hands behind you.”

George’s hand now held a gun, and he nodded grimly.

“Do as yo’re told,” he said coldly.

Mike stepped behind the ranchman, grabbed his wrists, and yanked them closer together. There came two slight clicks, and then the deputy reached around and took the Colt from its holster.

“On what charge?” roared the prisoner between streams of profanity.

“Cattle rustlin’,” said George. “That’s all, mebby, but it’s enough.”

The ranchman’s mind was working swiftly. If they took him to Hancock the news would spread quickly, and it would not be long before his brothers would hear of it. He smiled inwardly as he thought of that plank jail in back of the livery barn.

“How do I know you’ve got th’ right to make an arrest?” he demanded.

“That’s easy,” said Mike, pinning a badge on his open vest and moving around in front of the ranchman. He drew a folded paper from a hip pocket, unfolded it, flattened out the creased lines and held it up before the other’s eyes. “All legal an’ aboveboard,” he said, “but, Mister Jones, with what we got tied to a saddle this warrant ain’t needed. Behind that saddle is th’ skun-out piece of hide with one of yore *big* brands on it.”

George had swung to the ground and, picking up the ranchman's saddle, strode off to the little corral. In a few moments he was back again, leading the saddled horse.

"Well," he said, "one of us ought to be enough to get this thief to town, which leaves th' other to search th' shack." His hand slipped into a pocket and brought forth a coin. "If you call her wrong you take him in, an' I do th' searchin'. What you call?"

"Heads," grunted Mike and swore as the coin struck the earth and showed him tails.

"Mister Jones," said George, drawing another paper from a pocket, "here she is: a warrant to search an' seize. See you at th' trial. Get goin', Mike."

"I'll get goin' after I have a drink of water an' tie this feller's ankles together under th' belly of his hoss," retorted Mike.

A few moments later, the prisoner in his saddle and his ankles bound together by rawhide thongs, Mike roped the prisoner's horse to his own saddle, mounted, and started cross country straight into the southwest.

"You damn fool!" said Tom Jones angrily. "That ain't th' way to Hancock!"

"I'm right glad of that," replied Mike, "because we ain't goin' to Hancock. We're headin' for Twin River, an' th' easier you make my job for me, th' easier it'll be for you. I'd much rather take you in alive."

## 29

HOPALONG was leaving the barbershop, his newly honed razor in a pocket, when he heard pounding hoofs coming down the trail toward town. He now was alert for such sounds, eager for the arrival of one of the deputies, and he partly turned and glanced behind him. The rider was George, and he was in a hurry. Hopalong thought that he knew why: there was no picnic for George to attend, but there was a supper table, and it lacked about five minutes before the bell. The rider slowed a little as he entered the town and then dropped to a walk. As he drew near the waiting sheriff he raised a hand in a perfunctory gesture of salute, but his horse, thanks to a careless spur, leaped convulsively and surged close to the sidewalk, George fighting him harder than was necessary.

"Damn, flighty fool!" he growled. "*Same place after dark,*" he hurriedly muttered. "*Tonight.* Come on, now! Ca'm down! Ca'm down!" In an instant he was riding on again, a hard hand on the reins.

After a moment Hopalong walked on toward the hotel and a good supper, his mind as active as a beehive. The graveyard after dark. He hoped there would be no poker game this night to force him to act out of character. It was in the middle of the week, and that meant that the happy family would not ride in. The town crowd had played unusually late the night before and might be fed up with poker for a day or so. He pushed between the swinging doors and stopped at the bar.

"Scotch," he said, spinning a half dollar on the counter and watching its curving progress and its wobbly finish. "Abner



Jones still at Mrs. Thompson's?" he asked carelessly.

"Yes," answered the bartender, sliding bottle and glass expertly to within an inch of the waiting hand. "Doc says them breaks was bad. Looks like Abner'll be in bed for quite some weeks. I hear his temper is like a damn rattler. Doc was worried more about th' cuts, but they're all right."

"He's lucky his damn neck wasn't busted," growled Hopalong, sipping the liquor. "Well, here's to a good winter an' a big nat'ral increase."

"An' I might add, to smaller trail-herd margins," laughed the bartender. He glanced at the clock. "Door opens in two minutes. Figger you can wait that long?"

"Ain't got any choice," laughed the sheriff. "My appetite ain't up to standard. Reckon I better give my hoss a bit of exercise tomorrow, an' myself some along with it. What are we eatin' tonight?"

"New England biled dinner," answered the bartender with a grin.

When Hopalong left the dining room he found a chair in the barroom, tipped back, and became immersed in thought. An occasional customer came in and went out again. Twilight drifted in and deepened and at last shaded into darkness. The sheriff stirred and leaned forward, the front legs of the chair smacking solidly against the floor. He stood up, stretched, and wandered toward the front of the room.

"Some of th' town boys may come in," said the bartender. "It's a mite early yet."

"I'll be here when they come," replied the sheriff. "I ate too much, which seems to be a habit I'm gettin' into. Reckon I'll

walk around a little an' get some fresh air."

He pushed between the little doors and walked carelessly up the street and a few minutes later he approached the graveyard. "Hi!" said a low voice.

"Hi," replied the sheriff and altered his course a little. He sat down beside his deputy and listened to what the officer had to say.

"Huh!" he grunted, and he was grinning in the dark. "That means that Johnny an' Mesquite will be workin' th' fringe of th' next range. That's th' EEJ, belongin' to Ed Jones. All right, George, me an' you will team up tomorrow an' take care of th' GMJ, which is next in line."

"But suppose one of th' Jones brothers finds out that Tom is missin'?" asked George. "They mebbby will get suspicious." "They won't get suspicious on that account," replied Hopalong. "They'll figger he's off somewhere on his range. Get yoreself enough supplies to last two, three days. I'll meet you up on th' north trail a couple of miles from town. Right after breakfast." He stood up. "You shore you searched that shack right well?"

"Even to lookin' through a book he had, page by page," answered the deputy. "That missin' bill wasn't there."

"All right. See you in th' mornin'. I figger we got this job throwed an' hog-tied. Good night."

They separated, George moving off in the direction of his boardinghouse, the sheriff back the way he had come.

There was no poker game that night, and the sheriff went up to his room early to get a good night's sleep. Morning found him leaving the dining room and stopping at the bar.

"Gimme a couple sacks of tobacco," he said and, shoving them into his pockets, turned and made his way to and through the rear door and on to the stable. In a few moments he was in the saddle and after a short stop at the general store for supplies rode out of town along the north trail. As he rode up a slope and topped the rise he saw George sitting quietly in the saddle, waiting for him. They exchanged greetings and loped on together. Five hours later they reached the northern fringe of the GMJ and began their search.

To the west of Hopalong and George two riders had been working for several hours. They were Johnny and Mesquite and they rode through draws and patches of brush without any success until Mesquite suddenly held up a hand. Johnny stopped and looked inquiringly at his companion, who was perhaps two hundred yards away. Mesquite was sniffing eagerly. The two men rode closer together and finally met.

"Smoke," said Mesquite. "I don't smell it here but I did over there. Let's go back."

"Yeah," said Johnny. In a few moments he nodded, glancing upwind. He slipped out of the saddle and dropped the reins over the head of his horse, Mesquite doing the same. "Let's split up. You take th' right, me th' left. When I smell smoke at this time of th' day out on th' open range it makes me right suspicious."

Mesquite nodded and slipped his rifle from its scabbard. They separated and moved cautiously forward. Mesquite crept up to the top of the next ridge and, hatless, peered over it. He saw an Indian fire of dry wood burning a hundred yards away, and a tall, bewiskered puncher was squatting on his heels beside it, watching the changing color of a straight iron which had been thrust into the embers. Just

beyond him was a full grown cow lying on the ground, roped and tied, its brand side up. Its brand was the FL. Mesquite slid back a little and waited. Not for the world would he interrupt the forthcoming operation.

Johnny, well to the east, had also crept up to the top of a rise, hidden behind a bunch of grass. He, too, was hatless and he, also, watched the fire and knew the answer. He inched down the slope until he was out of sight of the intent man at the fire and he also waited. The situation in itself was sufficient for an arrest: a thrown and tied cow, a straight iron getting hot in a fire; but if the puncher was let alone and the brand was altered the hide of that animal, with the new blisters, would be permanent and tangible evidence.

The minutes dragged. Johnny looked at his watch and then inched up the slope again. The man at the fire was now bending over the cow, tracing carefully, the cherry-red iron sending up wisps of smoke from burning hair. His horse stood at the end of the rope, leaning hard against it, and in the scabbard on the saddle was a rifle. The man with the iron tossed it aside and reached down to jerk loose the tie thongs and then stiffened convulsively with surprise.

“Let ’em alone an’ raise yore hands!” shouted Johnny, and Mesquite’s voice came an instant later from the other direction. The man stepped back and held his right hand poised for a moment. He might have shot it out with one man, but the second voice coming from the other side and the range being point-blank for rifles, he let the hand fall to his side. He saw Johnny move into sight over the top of the rise and walk slowly toward him, rifle half raised and at the ready. The sun glinted from the badge on the open vest. He quickly turned his head and saw the second deputy slowly advancing from the opposite direction, his rifle, also, held at

the ready. He was helpless and he raised his hands above his head and cursed bitterly.

“Yo’re under arrest,” snapped Johnny. “Turn around an’ keep yore hands up.”

The steadily cursing man slowly obeyed.

Johnny stepped quickly forward; his hand streaked out and plucked the Colt from its holster, jamming the weapon into his own belt.

“Put yore hands down behind yore back, close together,” ordered Johnny, and a moment later the handcuffs clicked softly.

“What’s yore name?” asked Mesquite, lowering the rifle.

“None of yore damn business!” snapped the enraged prisoner.

“I’m makin’ it my business,” retorted Mesquite, studying the brand on the prostrate animal. “That mark was FL, meanin’ Frank Lorimer; now it’s EEJ. I reckon I know yore name. I’d say it’s Ed Jones, but that don’t make any difference right now. Sit down, pronto.”

Ed Jones slowly and grudgingly sat down as a rifleshot cracked in his ears. He glanced around quickly and saw Johnny lower the smoking gun and step swiftly toward the dead cow. He leaned down, untied the thongs from the feet of the carcass, and then turned and walked toward the prisoner. He stooped and picked up the iron, but it was too hot, and he let it drop.

“Put yore ankles together an’ keep still,” he ordered, and the rancher obeyed. Now, bound hand and foot and unable to

spring any desperate surprise, the prisoner was ignored as the two deputies went to work on the dead cow. It did not take them long to cut out and skin off the hide bearing the brand, and not long after that job had been finished three horsemen rode away from the scene.

"Well, we ain't got George an' Mike with us today," said Johnny. "Looks like we'll have to toss a coin by ourselves."

"There ain't no hurry," replied Mesquite. "We know that George or Hoppy or mebbby both of 'em will be workin' up north of th' next Jones ranch to th' east of us. What you say we ride over that way? I'd like to stay on th' job till it's finished."

"Me too," replied Johnny with a broad grin. "We ain't nowhere near finished here yet. We got to search this coyote's shack. It'll mebbby save a lot of time an' ridin' if we do it now." Mesquite swung his horse to the right and led the way south.

"Where is yore shack, Jones?" he asked curtly.

"None of yore damn business!" snapped the enraged prisoner. "And what right you got to search a man's house?"

"That's what I'd call a foolish question," answered Johnny. "All we got is this here search warrant." He produced the folded paper and jammed it into a pocket of the captive's coat. "Read it in jail," he laughed.

"Hell with him," grunted Mesquite, swinging still more to the right. "All we got to do is to cut his trail. Them tracks will take us right up to his front door."

"You win, you--!" snarled the prisoner. "Might as well save some uncomfortable ridin'. I'll show you th' way but I'm

tellin' you now that yo're wastin' yore time. There ain't nothin' in my shack for nobody to find."

"I never yet saw a cattle thief whose word was worth anythin' to me," retorted Mesquite. "We was told to search th' shack, an' that's what we're goin' to do." He slowed his horse and let the prisoner take the lead. "All right, take us to it."

The shack came into sight. The handcuffed man in the saddle had his ankles tied together under the belly of his horse, and now as they stopped before the little building Mesquite hobbled the animal while Johnny tied a lead rope to a stunted tree. Then they led their own horses close to the shack and stepped inside.

They spent nearly an hour in that one small room, but the search yielded them nothing. There was no five-hundred-dollar bill, no canvas sack. They left the building, closed the door securely behind them, freed their prisoner's horse, and soon were riding on again, heading eastward and a little north, hoping to find George and to give him the great honor of taking the second cattle thief to Twin River and thereby hogging to themselves whatever excitement remained.

# 30

THE SHERIFF and his deputy rode up out of a ravine and stopped as their heads came even with the upper ground. A steer was grazing not far away, and it raised its head and looked at them. The brand did not look right: the middle letter was lopsided and to such a degree as to catch the eye. Hopalong nodded to George, and the latter, shaking out his rope, pushed up the slope, chased the steer a short distance, roped it, and threw it. As it struck the ground Hopalong was leaping from his saddle. George, leaving the matters pertaining to the rope to the training of his horse, joined the sheriff, and within a few moments the steer's feet were tied.

"Hope we have better luck with this un," growled George. "Four in a row throwed so far, an' nothin' suspicious on any of 'em."

"Take my hoss an' ride up some place where you can see all around th' range," ordered Hopalong, pulling his razor from a pocket. He grinned as he thought of what the barber would have to say the next time he looked at it, if there was anything left of it worth honing.

Working swiftly, deftly, he shaved off the hairs along the bar of the G and then the right-hand downstroke of the M.

This latter mark was at a narrower angle than the one on the other side of the letter, and the sheriff, for this first time that morning, had hopes of finding something. One by one the stiff bristles were snipped off, and less than a quarter of an hour later the skin was exposed along the whole of the brand line. He then bared a short length of the right-hand inner line of the M and carefully examined and felt of them



both. There was a difference, not so much in the newness of the scar tissue as in the workmanship. The cicatrice of the crossbar of the G and the right-hand downstroke of the M were much lighter and thinner. If the iron had cooled while the brand was being made that could account for it, but the iron wouldn't have had time to cool on the crossbar and have to be reheated for the last stroke of the M. The sheriff considered the matter for some moments, reluctant to kill and skin another man's animal, but he believed that he now was justified. The skin side of the hide would answer the question. At last he stood up, loosened the lariat, but left the rawhide thongs on the cow's feet. He would know how to find it later and either shoot it or let it loose.

Mounting George's horse, he coiled the rope and rode off in the direction the deputy had taken. He stopped on the top of a rise and looked around. Off in the distance he saw his own horse standing quietly, its saddle empty, and then George's head and shoulders moved upward into view. Hopalong rode toward him. George whirled suddenly, his hand streaking to his holster, and then it stopped, and he looked down at something in his left hand.

The sheriff pulled up and looked down at the object.

"Burned hide, huh?" he grunted. The remains of the fire could still be seen, and it had been a big fire, judging by the size of the area discolored by the ashes. He held out his hand, and the deputy gave him the skin. His mind flashed back to Jim Glass: when Jim had been forced to shoot a broken-legged animal he could take the hide home and hang it to drain out in the open, for all eyes to see. In this case . . .

"I left th' cow tied," said the sheriff. "Ride west an' circle back. I'll take th' east. I'd rather not be found skinnin' that

steer, an' a gunshot carries quite a ways sometimes. Ride wide an' fast."

When he came within sight of the animal George was already there. He saw the deputy aim and shoot, and Hopalong remained where he was, slowly searching the plain on all sides. George was working fast, and he did not have much of the hide to skin off. As the sheriff looked around again he saw a thin haze of dust off to the west and instantly started toward it, his rifle resting-across the saddle. The sound of the shot had carried far. Three horses and their riders came into sight over the top of a low ridge, and the man in the middle was riding strangely. He was bound. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw George dipping down into-a hollow and riding at a gallop.

The trio to the west were pulling up, and the left-hand rider rode off at an angle. Huh. Flanker. The distance was steadily lessening. Suddenly Hopalong laughed and slowed his horse. He raised his hat high over his head and waved it. Perhaps ten seconds passed before he was answered by a waving Stetson. The flanking rider again changed his course and headed straight toward the waiting- sheriff. Hopalong could hear the pounding hoofbeats of George's mount, and he looked back, waving his hat again. The deputy slowed to a lope and slipped the rifle back into its scabbard.

"Who've you got?" shouted the sheriff.

"Cattle thief named Ed Jones, I reckon," yelled Johnny "We caught him with a nice red iron in his hand an' one of Frank Lorimer's cows at his feet. He was workin' very careful an' didn't know there was anybody around till we had him at point-blank range. We skinned out th' hide. Want to see it?"

"Yes, but I want to see George's first," answered the sheriff.

George pulled up alongside, grinning widely at his friends. He half turned in the saddle and worked quickly at something rolled up and lashed behind the cante. Then he handed the piece of skin to his boss.

The sheriff looked intently at the flesh side, nodded his satisfaction, and passed it on to Johnny, who examined it and handed it to Mesquite, who had just ridden up. Mesquite nodded grimly and gave it back to George.

"When we found that some coyote had taken th' time an' trouble to build a whoppin' fire an' burn a perfectly good skin," he said, his grin growing, "we figgered out th' answer. Then we went back to a steer we'd hog-tied, an' I did some skinnin' for myself. This'll be enough for any jury of cattlemen. Who you got, an' where'd you get him?"

"Reckon he's Ed Jones," answered Johnny and laughed. "He made us do some skinnin', too, only we didn't have to do no guessin'. We just waited till he'd changed th' brand an' then skun it out. Want to see how to make th' EEJ outa Frank Lorimer's FL?"

Hopalong held out his hand when Mesquite had unfastened the rolled-up skin, looked at it, and passed it on to the deputy. One glance at the fresh blisters was enough for George, and he handed it back.

"Well, what are we waitin' for?" he asked, wheeling his horse.

"We're waitin' long enough to swap hosses ag'in," said the sheriff, swinging to the ground.

"I was kinda hopin' you'd forget about it till we got back to town," laughed the deputy. "I never rode an easier ridin' hoss."

"I reckon we ought to turn this cattle thief over to a reg'lar deppety," said Johnny with a grin. "We don't want to take him to Hancock an' mebbly tip off our hand. Mike shouldn't have all th' glory of ridin into Twin River with a prisoner. George ought to have his own share. What you say, Hoppy?"

"This damn brand artist has got to go to Twin River," said Hopalong. He looked at George. "Things are goin' too well to take any fool chances. Reckon you can hold him till he sets into jail?"

"Hold him?" growled George. "I'll either hold him or I'll hole him!"

"All right," said the sheriff, turning to the others. "Dig up what grub you've got left an' give it to George. With yourn an' mine an' his own he ought to make out all right. He doesn't have to overfeed that damn thief. Give him th' hides too."

They watched the deputy and the prisoner ride off to the southwest, George's lariat running from his saddle horn to the bit ring of the prisoner's horse. Hopalong had no fear that they would be seen by any curious rider for the reason that there would be no such riders until the pair came to within a few miles of Twin River, and by that time it would make no difference.

"Well," he said, wheeling his horse, "now for George Jones." He thought for a moment. "Quickest way to locate th' shack will be to cut th' main trail and foller it south to where his own, little-used trail turns off, an' we ought to find wagon tracks on that."

They pitched down the western side of a small deep valley which Wolf Creek had made for itself, climbed the rough, steep eastern slope, and loped southeasterly. In about an

hour they cut the main trail and turned to the right. An hour later they came to where a fainter trail left it, heading northward, and the wagon tracks were there.

Again they found themselves angling down into Wolf Creek Valley, the wagon tracks running on ahead of them. Turning a sharp bend and an upthrusting mass of rock, they saw the house and corral below them and less than a quarter of a mile away. The door was closed, and no smoke came from the chimney.

There was no way to get to the house unseen, no cover, no ravines to shelter them and mask their approach. They pushed on and spread out as well as the nature of the ground would permit and as they neared the shack they were at least fifty yards apart.

Hopalong rode up to the door and dismounted as the others stopped. He knocked loudly. There was no response. He knocked again, and still there was no answer. Then he tried the door and found it locked. Stepping back, he hurled himself against the planks, and the door crashed inward and back.

There was a stove, table, several chairs, a bunk, and some shelves. He stepped to the door and beckoned. When his companions rode up he gave their orders to them. They were to take his horse and find some place which would hide their horses. One of them would stay with the animals; the other, come back on foot and hide himself behind a boulder or thicket as near the house as he could safely get and watch the shack, alert for his signal.

Johnny and Mesquite rode away, leading the sheriff's horse, and soon were lost to sight. Hopalong stepped into the

house, closed the door, and sat down to wait in a corner with the door and the two windows before him.

Time dragged, but the sheriff had the patience of a plainsman. He wished he could smoke and smiled faintly as he thought of how many times in the past he had denied himself this pleasure. Noon came and passed. The afternoon hours went tardily by. He was hungry but he had no food, and if he had he would not dare to cook it. Glancing up at the shelves, he nodded with satisfaction as he saw how well they were stocked. He again glanced at his watch: five o'clock. Time passed even slower now. Then he heard the distant steps of a shod horse crossing rock. They grew steadily louder and nearer and at last stopped before the door. It was almost dark now, and he was glad of that because the tracks of strange horses near the door would not be very noticeable. A key slipped into the lock, and at that moment Hopalong acted. He had been waiting with his hand on the knob, poised for the moment to come when the owner of the shack would discover that something was the matter with the lock. Hopalong yanked the door open with one hand and shoved a gun into the stomach of the amazed man outside. And he took the trouble to shove the gun so hard that it sank into the man's belly and could not be quickly knocked aside.

"Turn 'round an' raise yore hands!" he snapped.

"--!" shouted the rancher, but he slowly, grudgingly obeyed.

The sheriff slipped the captive's gun from its holster and jammed it behind his own belt.

"Put yore hands behind you," he ordered, and there quickly sounded the twin clicks of the handcuffs. "All right. Come in an' set down."

Hopalong stepped back and watched the cuffed man drop onto a chair, ignoring his shouted questions and demands. He lit the lamp and moved it slowly to and fro in the open door, and almost instantly Mesquite stepped into the house, glanced at the man on the chair, and then slipped out again as nearing hoofbeats told of Johnny's arrival. The horses were unsaddled and put into the small corral, and in a few minutes Johnny and Mesquite entered the shack, grinning at the curses and questions coming from the prisoner.

"Shut up!" snapped Hopalong, showing his badge. "This ain't a holdup. It's an arrest, on charge of cattle stealin'. Anythin' you say can be used against you." He turned to his special deputies. "We stay here tonight. Get a fire goin' an' cook supper. I'm damn near starved. Then we'll search th' shack. We'll take turns settin' up tonight, watchin' this damn thief. He'll have th' bunk, an' we'll roll up on th' floor. Tomorrow mornin' one of us will stay right here with him while th' other two finish th' job out on th' range. After that we've got a job to do in town."

"You can't search my house!" roared the prisoner, and this time some attention was paid to his words.

"I've got a search warrant here empowerin' me to search th' house an' premises of George Jones," said Hopalong, producing a paper and laying it across the prisoner's knees. "I'm sheriff of Twin River County, an' th' search'll be made."

"Huh!" sneered the ranchman. "What th' hell do you expect to find?"

"Th' answer is in that warrant," retorted Hopalong and leaned against the wall to watch the culinary progress of his two friends.

# 31

WITH THE COMING of daylight Johnny, who had the third watch, made a fire in the stove and got busy in the preparation of breakfast. His companions, including the prisoner, were sleeping soundly. As the light increased he blew out the lamp, and as he did so there was a movement in the bunk. George Jones, his wrists cuffed together in front to allow him a more comfortable sleeping position, rolled over and shifted the position of his cuffed ankles. He glared at the two men in their blankets on the floor and at the busy cook.

"By Gawd, you--will pay for this!" he growled.

"Mebby, an' mebby not, but I'm right shore you'll have somethin' to pay for," retorted Johnny. "Wait till we shave th' whiskers off'n Abner, an' you may even have more to pay for." "What you mean, shave th' whiskers off'n Abner?" snarled the captive.

"Th' negro porter on that train had a good look at him. Nine of those five-hundred bills have turned up. Their numbers was recorded. What happened to th' other?"

"I don't know what th' hell yo're talkin' about," growled the man in the bunk.

"No?" asked Johnny. "When we get th' whiskers off you'll all have somethin' to worry about."

"Yo're loco!" snapped the prisoner.



Hopalong and Mesquite threw off their blankets and sat up at about the same moment and exchanged grins with each other and with the busy cook. Hopalong stretched mightily and yawned.

“Th’ bacon an’ th’ coffee smell good,” he said. “You makin’ biscuits?”

“Yeah,” answered Johnny. “Who’s stayin’ with this damn thief an’ who’s goin’ with you?”

“I ain’t makin’ that choice,” answered the sheriff with a knowing smile. “Reckon you better toss a coin.”

Breakfast over and the dishes washed and stacked, the coin was tossed, and Mesquite grunted as it picked him out to stay with the prisoner. They ordered that gentleman to get out of the bunk, where he had eaten his breakfast, and to sit on the floor with his back to the wall. His hands had been cuffed behind him again. And there he sat and glowered at the searchers of his shack. Mesquite finally minutely examined the seams of the cheap cotton mattress for indications that the stitches of the seams had been disturbed. The search was a thorough one, but it had been made in vain.

Hopalong and Johnny went out to the corral, saw that the feed they had thrown in the night before had been cleaned up, and saddled their horses. Watering them at the trough, they led them to the door of the shack and then went back to water the two other animals.

Johnny swung up into the saddle while the sheriff was finishing fastening his bedroll behind the cande, Mesquite standing in the door watching them.

"No need to tell you what to do," said the sheriff as he mounted. "We only got one more to get out on th' range. After we put th' cuffs on him I'll take him in to town, an' Johnny'll come back here an' give you th' word to ride in with George. After we get Matt Jones I'll turn him over to th' town marshal an' then take care of Abner. All right, see you in town. Hey! You want us to cache yore hoss, in case Matt might come over to pay his brother a visit?"

"No," answered Mesquite. "He might discover it an' get suspicious, findin' it hid. If he sees two hosses in th' corral he'll probably figger that it's all right. If he gets within rifle range I'll take care of him. I'll be watchin'."

"All right then. So long."

"So long, Mesquite," said Johnny with a grin.

"So long, an' good luck," replied Mesquite, and he stepped back and closed the door behind him. He regarded the stove for a moment and decided to let the fire die out. At this time of the year there would be no fire in the stove except at mealtime, and at mealtimes today there would be a fire.

The sheriff and Johnny rode south and a little west, and they spent the entire day scouting on the fringes of the MMJ range without seeing an animal with a brand which appeared to be suspicious. Late in the afternoon they gave up the search and returned to the GMJ to spend another night there.

Hopalong was worried, but with what he had on the other three brothers and with what he believed he could prove against Abner he made up his mind to search Matt Jones's shack on the next day. He had the proper warrant to do so and even if he did not find the missing stolen bill he would arrest the ranchman, take him to town, have him shaved,

and confront him with Len Danvers. Everything and every scrap of evidence he had obtained tended to hook Matt Jones in with the activities of his brothers. If he could not connect him with the stolen cattle he believed that he could connect the rancher with the train robbery.

Mesquite stood in the open door, watching them as they rode up.

"Any luck?" he asked as they dismounted at the corral.

"No, not yet," answered the sheriff, stripping off his bedroll and saddle. He turned the horse into the corral and started toward the little grain house, Johnny at his heels. The horses watered and fed, the two friends walked back to the shack and stepped inside. George Jones was sitting on a chair, cursing them under his breath.

"Well, Jones," said the sheriff, standing before the cuffed man, "you might as well tell us all about it. We've got Tom and Ed as well as you an' we've got all three of you dead to rights. We know that five of you were in that train holdup an' that Sam wasn't with you. That leaves Matt. Was he with you?"

"Go to hell an' find out for yoreself!" snapped the prisoner, his face working.

"I don't reckon we'll have to go to hell to find out," retorted the sheriff. "Tomorrow I'm goin' to slap a search warrant on brother Matt an' take his shack apart, piece by piece, if I have to. I'll be lookin' for a certain five-hundred-dollar bill that is still missin'. You reckon I'll find it?"

"You--!" shouted the prisoner. "If I could only get loose an' on a hoss you'd have some trouble gettin' near enough to Matt's shack to serve that damn warrant!"

Hopalong was watching him closely and believed that he detected a worried and anxious expression on the man's face, however well he tried to mask it.

"Seein' th' hole yo're in I reckon yo're dead right," answered Hopalong. "Or, better yet, let's say that if you was loose an' on a hoss, that by th' time we got to Matt's shack we would be invited to step right in an' search all we wanted to. That's what you really meant to say, ain't it?"

"You go to hell!" snarled the prisoner. "By Gawd, you'll sweat for this!"

"Yore wrong, Jones," replied the sheriff. "We won't sweat a-tall. You'll do th' sweatin' on a rock pile. We got you cold, with plenty of evidence, just like we got yore brothers Tom an' Ed. It might go easier for you if you do some talkin'. If you do I'll remember it an' put in a good word for you with th' judge when th' time comes."

"To hell with you!" shouted the prisoner. "To hell with th' judge! Turn me loose; give me a gun, an' I'll shoot it out ag'in th' three of you!"

"Yet you didn't dare take a chance of doin' any shootin' when you did have a gun," retorted the sheriff. "I want you alive an' not dead." He turned to look at the busy cook. "How soon do we eat?"

"Pronto," grunted Mesquite, busy at the stove.

When the sun rose the following morning Hopalong and Johnny pushed back from the table and sighed gratefully. Mesquite looked at Johnny.

"I stood th' trick here yesterday," he said with a smile. "Don't you figger we ought to take turns on this job?"

Johnny looked up and regarded his friend seriously. Then he glanced at Hopalong, whose expression told nothing.

"Why," answered Johnny reluctantly, "I reckon so. You wouldn't want to toss ag'in?"

"We tossed yesterday to see who'd stay on th' job right here," replied Mesquite with a smile. "It's th' same job, only another day."

"W-e-l-l," admitted Johnny, scratching his head, "I reckon that's right. Anyhow, go saddle yore hoss. I'll stay here with friend George."

Hopalong nodded approvingly and turned on a heel.

"Come on, Kid," he said. "We got us a search to make."

Winters were cold in this country, and their winds strong and penetrating. Many of the small ranch houses had no windows in their north walls. As Hopalong and Mesquite, having followed the main trail in a southwesterly direction and then found and followed the fainter trail leading north from it, came within sight of the shack they left the trail and turned to their right.

A quarter of an hour later they approached the house from the north on its blind side. When within half a mile of it they dismounted, dropped the reins down over the heads of their horses, and went forward on foot, a hundred yards or more apart but steadily converging as they drew nearer to it. At last they quietly reached the north wall, Mesquite at one end, Hopalong at the other.

Hopalong looked around the corner and saw that the west end had no window, which meant that it was the bunk end. He slipped silently along it and peered around the next

corner. Between him and the door was a window, and he frowned and waited to see if Mesquite would appear at the opposite corner. Mesquite did not show himself, and the sheriff knew why: there was a window in that end wall. Hopalong slipped back, worked silently along the north wall, and rounded its east corner. Mesquite turned like a Hash and then watched his companion's gesturing hands. He nodded and remained where he was. Both stiffened at a noise inside the house and then relaxed.

Hopalong walked away, back toward the horses. His appearance on foot would arouse instant suspicion. As he left Mesquite slipped around the corner along the blind north wall and then along the also blind west wall, where he stopped and waited.

Minutes passed, and then a horseman came into sight, riding openly up the faint trail and straight toward the house. Mesquite's quick look satisfied him, and he drew back around the corner once more. Hopalong's vest was unbuttoned at the top, his sheriff's shield pinned to its lining. The touch of a finger would expose it. He rode slowly, at a walk. The house came steadily nearer, and when it was about a hundred yards away the door opened suddenly, and a short, heavy-set man popped into the opening, a rifle held at the ready in his hands.

"What you want?" he called, angrily.

"I'm lookin' for a town called Hancock," answered Hopalong, still riding on.

This shack look like a town to you?" demanded the ranchman. "Turn 'round an' get th' hell off'n my range!" He raised the rifle halfway to his shoulder. "You heard me, an' I mean it! Get off'n my range!"

“That ain’t no way to greet a-” said Hopalong.

“Drop that gun!” snapped Mesquite, his Colt leveled.

The ranchman turned his head swifdy, saw that he was covered from behind and then, looking back at the horseman, saw that he also was covered from the front. For a moment he hesitated and then saw the horseman’s empty hand reach up and turn the upper edge of the vest. A silver badge shone in the sunlight, and the rancher lowered his arms and dropped the gun.

“What th’ hell you want with me?” he growled.

“Unbuckle yore gun belt an’ let it drop,” ordered Hopalong sharply. “Don’t take th’ chance. I’m Sheriff Cassidy of Twin River an’ I’ve a warrant to search these premises.”

‘ Yo’re a---!’ snapped the ranchman.

“Unbuckle that gun belt an’ step clear of it when it drops,” said Mesquite coldly, and there was something in the voice that carried a deadly certainty.

Matt Jones carefully and slowly slipped the pin of the buckle out of its hole and stepped sideways as the belt and its gun struck the ground.

“Who th’ hell swore out a search warrant ag’in me?” he demanded.

“I did,” answered the sheriff.

“On what grounds?”

“Th’ grounds was good enough for th’ warrant to be issued,” replied the sheriff.

"An' what you expect to find?" demanded the enraged ranchman.

Hopalong swung down from the saddle, gun still in hand, and took a folded paper from a pocket. He tossed it at the ranchman's feet.

"You can read th' answer for yoreself," said the sheriff, stepping back.

Matt Jones picked up the warrant, read it rapidly, and then tore it across, swearing steadily.

"A five-hundred-dollar bill, bearin' one of th' followin' numbers, huh?" he sneered. "What th' hell would I be doin' with a five-hundred-dollar bill, an' who gives a damn about any numbers?"

"That's what we're goin' to try to find out," answered Hopalong, stepping forward again. "Turn 'round an' put yore hands behind you. One false move, an' I'll blow you apart."

"I reckon there's nothin' left for me to do, with two--throwin' down on me," growled the rancher. He cursed anew as the cuffs clicked around his wrists. In the next instant his ankles were linked together.

"All right, Kid," said Hopalong, moving toward the belt and its gun. He picked them up and took them with him into the house, where Mesquite was already at work. Half an hour later they looked at each other and slowly shook their heads. The shack had been turned inside out, without results.

"Reckon mebbly he's got it buried in a can outside som'ers," growled Mesquite. "Or mebbly it's on Abner."



“Mebby,” grunted the sheriff. “We’ve searched everythin’, an’ I reckon it ain’t here. Mebby it is on Abner. . . He was looking at a partly used package of XXX coffee on a shelf. They had emptied out the beans and looked into their container, but not the coffee. “There’s one place we ain’t looked. Reach up an’ look in that package of coffee.”

Mesquite took it down and poured the cheap coffee beans on the table. He peered into the paper sack and swiftly thrust in a finger and a thumb.

“This what you want?” he asked with a happy grin. “It’s a five-hundred-dollar one.”

“What’s th’ number?” asked the sheriff, digging a bit of paper from a vest pocket. He listened and looked at the same time and then nodded. “That’s th’ one,” he said, holding out his hand. He looked it over and again compared the numbers. “Come on, Kid. Close th’ door behind you. We’ll saddle Matt’s hoss, an’ I’ll take him to town. You ride hard to th’ GMJ an’ come to town with Johnny an’ that damn thief. Th’ jail’s back of th’ livery stable—th’ stagecoach office. If I ain’t in sight when you get to town you’ll likely find me at Mrs. Thompson’s boardin’house. Come on.”

## 32

HOPALONG left the trail a few miles above Hancock, circled, and came into the town from the east, at a point behind the stage barn, his prisoner riding a little in advance. As they passed the big, open door of the barn a stableman caught sight of them, ran to the door, and looked out, his mouth agape.

"Matt Jones!" he sputtered.

"Go 'round an' tell Hank Barlow I want to see him," ordered Hopalong as the horses stopped. "Tell him to bring th' key of th' jail."

"Great Gawd!" said the stableman, and left on a dead run.

Marshal Barlow popped suddenly into sight, his unbelieving eyes on the prisoner. He saw the sheriff's badge shining on the black, dusty vest. His mouth opened.

"Marshal, I'm changin' my name ag'in," said Hopalong with a grin. "I'm Hopalong Cassidy, sheriff of this county. I've arrested Matt Jones on th' charge of train robbery, an' after we have more time to look over his cattle there'll likely be another charge ag'in him. I'm turnin' him over to you for safekeepin'. Lock him up."

*"Train robbery! Train robbery!"* cried Barlow in amazement. "I've had my suspicions, but—*train robbery!*"

"Pick up Tim Thompson as a material witness," said the sheriff. "That'll hold him till I can look into his case. Two of my special deppeties will be here before dark with George

Jones. Th' charge ag'in him is train robbery an' cattle stealin'. Lock him up in a separate cell if you have more'n one. Tom an' Ed Jones are on their way to Twin River, charged with cattle stealin', together with th' evidence ag'in 'em. I'm goin' to pay Abner a visit. Want to come along?"

"I—I—yes!" exclaimed Barlow.

"Send a deppety marshal out to th' LD an' have him bring in Len Danvers," continued the sheriff, and smiled at the look on Barlow's face. "I figger Len can identify Matt Jones as takin' part in a little deal they had. Tell Len to bring in a copy of certain numbers he has got. Numbers of a piece of paper money. He knows all about it."

The marshal led the way to the little jail, unlocked the door, stood to one side as the cursing Matt slouched through it, then closed and locked the door behind the prisoner.

"I want to get to Abner before th' word gets there first," said the sheriff, eying a small group of staring onlookers at the edge of the sidewalk. "Send 'round an' get th' barber. Better go yoreself if it'll have more weight. Tell him he's got some whiskers to cut off at Mrs. Thompson's boardin'house. I'll be lookin' for an identifyin' scar on Abner's right cheek. Then he can go to work on Matt."

He mounted and rode up the street and when he stopped he was at Mrs. Thompson's kitchen door. A moment after he knocked an elderly, tired-looking woman opened the door and started slighdy as she saw the badge.

"Mrs. Thompson," said Hopalong, taking off the Stetson, 'I'm Sheriff Cassidy of this county. I'm mighty sorry but I'll have to make an arrest in yore house."

Her hand went to her breast, and her face grew pale.

“Not—not Tim?” she breathed.

“No, ma’am. Not Tim. Tim will be held as a material witness. May I come in?”

“Why—yes—I suppose so. Who—ah-?”

“Will you please show me to Abner Jones’ room? If th’ door is closed open it, leavin’ it that way, go in an’ get somethin’, an’ come right out ag’in. Don’t do anythin’ to make him suspicious.”

“Abner Jones!” she whispered but turned and led the way in silence.

The door was open, and Mrs. Thompson pointed at it. Hopalong stepped through it, hand on gun. Abner looked at him without turning his head.

“Don’t make no quick move, Abner,” ordered the sheriff. “I have a warrant for yore arrest. Th’ charge, right now, is train robbery, as th’ warrant states in quite some detail. I’m warnin’ you that anythin’ you say can be used ag’in you.”

He stepped forward, placed the warrant on Abner’s body, and lifted a gun belt and holstered gun from the post of the headboard.

“Yo’re a damn, locoed, blunderin’ fool!” snapped Abner, rage in his eyes.

“Mcbby,” grunted the sheriff calmly, tossing the belt and its gun on the floor near a chair. Then he sat down on the chair and stretched out his legs. “There’ll be a barber here right soon. I’m lookin’ for a scar on yore right cheek, a thin scar, runnin’ from yore chin to th’ lobe of yore right ear. There’ll be some funny little dots where th’ stitches was.”

"You can't shave off my whiskers! No man on earth can do that!" roared Abner. "I won't stand for it!"

"There'll be enough of us here to take care of that," said Hopalong. He glanced at the splints. "I'd advise you to take it easy. I don't want to do you no harm, but them whiskers are comin' off, an' that's orders!"

"You an' yore damn orders!" shouted Abner, and struggled to sit up, but Mrs. Thompson ran into the room and pushed him back, earnestly admonishing him.

Hopalong glanced out of the window and saw a crowd before the house, and then, pushing his way through it, there came a little man carrying a black satchel. The little man did not bother to knock but burst through the front door like an angry hen.

"What's th' meanin' of this?" he demanded, glaring at the sheriff. His voice fairly crackled with anger. "What you doin' to my patient?"

"Nothin', yet," answered Hopalong. "He's under arrest but in a little while he's goin' to lose his whiskers."

"You can't touch my patient! I won't have it!"

"You hang 'round an' see," retorted Hopalong.

"You can't take him out of here till his bones are knitted!" yelled the doctor. "You'll find that a doctor's got some authority!"

"How long will it take for th' bones to knit?" asked the sheriff, who had not even the slightest intention of moving Abner until it was safe to do so.

“Five weeks, mebby six!”

“Two weeks have gone past already, ain’t they?” asked the sheriff after a little figuring.

“I—ah—yes. Yes, two weeks tomorrow. I forbid you to move him till I say you can!”

“I had no thought of doin’ that,” retorted the sheriff. “You wouldn’t like to stick a needle in him an’ put him to sleep while his whiskers are bein’ shaved off, so he won’t struggle an’ mebby get cut?”

“I’ll do nothin’ of th’ kind!” sputtered the doctor with vast indignation. “An’ I warn you ag’in injurin’ him!”

“Suppose you cool off an’ quit fussin’?” retorted Hopalong, looking him over from head to foot.

Voices and steps were heard in the outer room, and Marshal Barlow, with the surprised barber and two deputies, entered the bedroom.

“Well, Abner,” said the marshal quietly, “yo’re goin’ to get shaved. Let us do it without any fuss. There’s enough of us here to hold you if we have to, but yo’re goin’ to get shaved, regardless. What you say?”

“What th’ hell can I say, except that yo’re a pack of idiots! I can’t help myself, can I?”

“That’s how I figger it,” said the marshal kindly. He turned to the now grinning barber. “Go to work, Hiram.”

“You got a man at th’ jail to take care of th’ next prisoner when he’s brought in?” asked the sheriff.

“Yes, th’ jailer,” answered the marshal. “I brought these two boys along after swearin’ ’em in. They’ll take turns ridin’ herd on Abner till he’s ready to go to Twin River. They’re good boys, an’ you needn’t worry.”

“Twenty-four hours a day,” said Hopalong.

“That’s right, twenty-four hours a day,” agreed the marshal. “I’ve sent a man off to get Danvers.”

“Good,” grunted the sheriff.

Judging by the sounds made by the snipped hairs, Abner’s whiskers could give hog bristles a close race. The barber had started on the right cheek first, according to instructions, and was making good headway, his scissors snipping steadily and swiftly. From time to time he glanced at the doctor, who leaned against the wall and kept a silent, grim, and glowering watch over the proceedings.

Suddenly a loud, angry voice was heard in the other room and the softer, worried voice of a woman. An unshaven, halfdrunken man lurched into the doorway of the bedroom and found himself instantly between the two deputies.

“What’s th’ matter here? What’s goin’ on?” he roared.

Marshal Barlow nodded, and the three men in the doorway slowly struggled back and out of sight. After a few moments one of the deputies returned and resumed his place near the bed without a word of explanation.

“That was Tim,” said the marshal to Hopalong. “He’s bein’ took care of.”

“Seein’ that he works for all them Jones brothers he’s right important,” replied the sheriff with a smile.

At last the whiskers were off, and the barber rubbed in the lather and stropped his razor. The soft scratching filled the otherwise quiet room, and Hopalong and the marshal moved silently to a better vantage point. Slowly the scar came into sight, and slowly it lengthened. Hopalong and Barlow nodded to each other at the same instant, and both men were grinning.

The marshal turned to his deputy.

“Yo’re on for th’ first watch?” he asked.

The deputy nodded and moved toward a chair.

“All right. Don’t let him out of yore sight,” ordered the marshal. He turned to Hopalong. “I’m goin’ back to th’ jail, Sheriff. You want to come along?”

The barber looked up.

“I can do th’ next job a lot easier if you’ll bring him around to th’ shop,” he said.

Barlow looked at Hopalong inquiringly. The sheriff nodded assent and grinned.

“You mean th’ next two jobs,” he said. “Matt an’ George,” and then turned to follow the marshal. They went out through the kitchen door, and Hopalong, leading his horse, walked with the marshal through the curious and questioning crowd and on to the office of the Hancock stage line, where questions were asked and answered until interrupted by the sounds of hoofs. Both men stood up and went to the door.

Johnny and Mesquite, with George Jones between them, rode slowly toward the building and stopped as the sheriff



stepped out on the sidewalk.

'Take him around to th' barbershop an' wait there," said the sheriff.

"I ain't goin' to no barbershop!" snapped the prisoner.

"Somethin' tells me yo're dead wrong," said Johnny, wheeling his horse, as Mesquite reached out a hand to the bit ring of the ranchman's horse. They turned and rode back up the street, their prisoner cursing anew.

"Reckon we better let Matt wait till after George gets slicked up," suggested the marshal with a wide grin. "You was sayin'-'"

Hopalong forthwith re-entered the office and continued his story.

Time passed, and then Johnny and Mesquite, their whitefaced, newly shaved prisoner between them, pulled up against the sidewalk before the open door. The marshal arose hastily and hurried from the room, the jail key already in a hand. Hopalong followed more slowly, stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, and then, turning on a heel, walked toward the barbershop.

The shadows were growing longer. Matt, his once sheltered face now as white as that of his brother, was brought back to the jail and locked up. The shadows increased. Hopalong, the marshal, Johnny and Mesquite, and the marshal's second deputy sat on the edge of the walk and continued to discuss the case and all its incidents. Mesquite grunted something and nodded to the south, where two riders were making good time toward the town.

"Purdy an' Danvers," said the marshal. "You'll know purty

"Yeah," answered the sheriff.

The riders rapidly approached. They reached the group on the sidewalk and dismounted, tying their horses to the rail, and became part of the group. The jailer unlocked the door and opened it. Danvers led the way and stopped before the first of the two cells.

"Yeah," he said after closely examining George. "He's one of them that gave me that bill." Then he moved on a few steps and stopped again. After a moment he shook his head. "This feller wasn't there."

"That's all right," said the sheriff, digging into a pocket and bringing out a big bill. "You said you copied th' number of th' bill they handed you? All right. You bring a copy of that number with you?"

"Yeah," answered Danvers, producing a slip of paper torn from a tomato can. He took the bill, compared the numbers, and nodded. "That's it," he said and handed it back.

"Thanks, Danvers, for yore trouble," said the sheriff. "You needn't put curtains to yore windows no longer or watch out for ambushers. We got 'em all." He glanced around and led the way from the jail. When they were all out and the heavy door closed and locked the sheriff glanced at his watch.

"Marshal, I'll be takin' th' prisoners off yore hands right after breakfast tomorrow," he said. "My work's all done over here till we come back for Abner. See that their hosses get a good breakfast."

"What about Sam Jones, out back?"

"He wasn't at th' train robbery, an' I ain't got anythin' even leadin' to him about th' cattle stealin'; 'though from th' way

he jumped one day when I come on him unexpected, I reckon he's got guilty knowledge. We may call him as a witness if we figger we need him."

"I personally know that every animal he's got was bought about three, four years ago an' bought honestly," said the marshal.

Hopalong nodded.

"You know, a man's ears are right handy, an' gossip can be real valuable," he said, and laughed. "I'm buyin' a round of drinks an' supper for th' whole crowd. An' if anybody present reckons he can play poker he's goin' to need a barrel to get home in."